

Holmes of Kyoto

~Counterfeit Case Files~

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Mai Mochizuki

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Mai Mochizuki

Aoi Mashiro

Age 17. She is a second-year high school student who moved to Kyoto from Omiya, Saitama. In an unexpected turn of events, she winds up working part-time at Kura. After quite some time, she has finally moved on from her ex-boyfriend at her previous school.



Kiyotaka Yagashira

Age 22. He is a first-year graduate student at Kyoto University. Nicknamed “Holmes,” he has an incredibly sharp mind despite his gentle demeanor. His grandfather is the owner of Kura, an antique store in Kyoto’s Teramachi-Sanjo district. Sometimes, he acts like your typical mischievous, “wicked” Kyoto boy.



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In Kyoto's Teramachi-Sanjo district stands an antique store named "Kura." There, you can find a mysterious and unique individual, not yet a Kyoto man but a "Kyoto guy," nicknamed "Holmes" because of his exceptional eye for observation and appraisal.

"No, Aoi. I'm called 'Holmes' because my surname is Yagashira."

Right, his surname has the character for "Home" in it.

"Wait, you're still saying that?"

Set in Kyoto, these are the graceful case files of Kiyotaka Yagashira a.k.a. Holmes and me, high school student Aoi Mashiro.

Prologue: At Summer's End

Heading south into the Teramachi-Sanjo shopping district from Oike Street, I arrive at a small antique store. The sign has a single word on it: Kura, meaning "storehouse." This is the name of the store where I, Aoi Mashiro, work part time.

The store's interior is a blend of Japanese and Western aesthetics, reminiscent of the Meiji and Taisho eras. The antique sofa and counter bring to mind a Western-style manor's drawing room. It's almost like a retro-modern cafe. A smallish chandelier hangs from the modestly high ceiling, and a large grandfather clock rests against a wall. Further inside the store are many rows of shelves adorned with antiques and miscellaneous goods.

The owner's grandson—Kiyotaka Yagashira, nicknamed "Holmes"—is looking after the store today. He is pale-skinned with a slim build and slightly long front bangs. A handsome young man with refined features.

"Is something the matter, Aoi?" Holmes asked as the grandfather clock gonged, indicating that it was 1:00 p.m. He didn't look up from his bookkeeping—apparently, his senses were so good that he didn't have to see me to realize I was staring at him.

“Oh, no. I was just spacing out because I finished cleaning. Is there any other work for me to do?” I answered, flustered. I wasn’t lying. I’d more or less finished cleaning and was inadvertently staring at Holmes’s elegant profile, feather duster in hand.

“Nothing in particular... Shall we start ‘Learning Time,’ then?”

“Y-Yes! I’d love to!” I shouted eagerly.

“This isn’t a bar, Aoi,” Holmes said, smiling cheerfully. “Please come sit at the counter.”

“Okay.” I nodded and excitedly approached the counter. Holmes stood up without making a sound and pulled a chair out for me. “Th-Thank you.” He gave a light bow and then headed towards the back of the store. As usual, each and every one of his movements was elegant and refined. It’s been almost five months since I started working here, and his graceful mannerisms are a constant reminder that I need to be better, too.

“Today, we’ll be looking at this. It’s from my grandfather’s collection,” Holmes said, bringing over a small box. He was wearing his usual white gloves—or not? They were black gloves this time.

“Holmes, did you switch to black gloves?” I asked loudly. I was surprised, because I’d only ever seen him wearing white ones.

“Yes, I have black gloves too. You weren’t aware?” he said nonchalantly. He then sat down across from me and carefully took a tea bowl out of the box. “Now then, it’s learning time,” he said with a grin, holding up his long index finger in front of his mouth. The different glove color was enough to change his aura, and it made my heart beat faster for some reason.

He placed the ceramic tea bowl on the counter between us. “Learning Time” was what Holmes called his lectures about antique art. They differed from his usual spontaneous explanations in that they were formal lessons that he had started when summer vacation began. Since I wasn’t going to have school for a long time, he asked me to come in more often—not because there was a lot of work for me to do, but simply because the store needed someone to keep watch when Holmes or his father were out. The store generally didn’t get many

customers, and cleaning and inventory checks were an endless task regardless of how much effort I put in. I often didn't know what to do with my time, so Holmes decided to make effective use of it by teaching me about antiques.

The piece this time had a conventional bowl shape. It was light brown with a dark brown floral pattern. I hadn't seen this one before.

"What is this?"

"It's an old Karatsu tea bowl."

"Old Karatsu...?"

"It means it was produced during the Momoyama period, in what is now Saga Prefecture. Please take a close look at it first."

"Okay." I stared at the tea bowl. It looked simple yet refined. But to be blunt, the flowers painted on it were crude to the point where I couldn't tell what was going on. "The pattern isn't particularly artistic," I blurted out honestly without thinking.

Holmes smiled and nodded. "Yes, that's part of the aesthetic. It's said that old Karatsu is the final destination for pottery fans. The characteristic traits of this piece are that it's made from hard clay and has wrinkles at the unglazed foot. These are called 'fine wrinkles.'"

"Fine wrinkles..." I nodded and took my notebook out of my pocket to jot down Holmes's explanations and my own impressions.

"You're always such an eager student."

"N-No, it's just that I'll probably forget if I don't write it down. You're taking the time and effort to teach me, so this is the least I can do as your apprentice, Professor Holmes." I saluted briskly.

"There's no need to exaggerate. I still have much to learn myself." Holmes shrugged with a strained smile. Right, Holmes was the grandson and apprentice of Seiji Yagashira, renowned nationally certified appraiser and owner of this store, and was still undergoing his training.

"Come to think of it, what kind of training do you do to become an appraiser?"

“That’s a difficult question to answer. I suppose it boils down to gaining experience. There’s nothing you can do but interact with as many genuine articles as you can. My grandfather always says that you have to train the mind’s eye through observing authentic antiques,” Holmes said in a serious tone, placing the valuable Karatsu tea bowl back in the box.

Just as I nodded earnestly, the door chime rang.

“W-Welcome!” I hurriedly stood up and bowed. Since it’s so rare for us to get customers, I always panic when it happens.

Holmes on the other hand remained perfectly composed. He smiled and said, “Welcome” as he returned the box to its shelf.

The customer was a middle-aged man wearing a sleek, expensive-looking suit and a gold wristwatch. He was holding something wrapped in cloth. At a glance, he looked wealthy...but something was off. He didn’t have the right air. *Maybe he’s an upstart?* I wondered. Holmes could instantly figure out all sorts of things about a person just from looking at them, and I got the feeling that spending so much time with him had put me into the habit of making assumptions about people.

“I’ve got something I want appraised. Can you do it?” the man asked, walking towards the counter with a smile.

“Yes, of course. Please have a seat.” Holmes smiled back and gestured towards the sofa in front of the counter.

“Thanks,” the man said, sitting down. “Could you take a look at this?” He unfolded the cloth and held out the box that was inside.

Judging from the size of the box, it might be a tea bowl? I stood a short distance away from the counter, stealing glances at it while dusting off a shelf.

“It would be my pleasure.” Holmes opened the box, still wearing his black gloves. He took out a tea bowl, just as I’d expected. It was a shallow cylinder-type bowl, brownish-yellow with dark green flowers. “Well, I’ll be.” He broke out into a wide grin as though he’d encountered something amusing.

“My ancestors have been doing business in Osaka for generations, and this was in the back of our storehouse. It was part of my grandpa’s collection—

called a Kizeto tea bowl, I think? It's supposed to be real nice, but I'm not interested in this stuff, so." The man spoke cheerfully and incessantly, leaning in as if thinking that Holmes had taken interest in the bowl.

"Kizeto, you say?" Holmes murmured. He glanced sideways at me without turning his head. That was a signal. His eyes were asking me, *What do you think?*

He'd already taught me about Kizeto during one of our summer vacation learning sessions. I silently nodded and looked closely at the tea bowl again. The brownish-yellow piece had a matte finish and a rugged sense of weight to it. It did seem historic, and at a glance, it did look like Kizeto ware. However, I couldn't shake the feeling that there was something off about it. I had a hunch that it wasn't real. I couldn't explain why, but it just didn't sit well with me.

I shook my head and Holmes nodded with a satisfied look, as if saying I was correct. He then looked back at the man and said flatly, "Unfortunately, this is a counterfeit." The man's eyes widened. Holmes continued, "Real Kizeto ware has what is colloquially known as 'oily skin'—a lustrous texture as if oil had been poured over the clay—as well as a clean feeling. This piece has none of that. Additionally, real pieces are lighter than they appear. This one is too heavy. Furthermore, the coppery-green coloring on real pieces, known as chalcantite, is supposed to be vivid, but the color here is quite darkened. I can say with certainty that this is a counterfeit piece of Kizeto ware created in bad faith," Holmes said coldly, holding up the tea bowl.

The man seemed dumbfounded for a moment. Then a crooked smile rose to his lips. "Wh-What would a youngster like you know?" he lashed out angrily. He must not have been able to accept that the treasure he'd brought in thinking it was real had been denounced by such a young appraiser.

"I do know. And if you'll allow me to say one more thing, you brought this here *knowing* that it was fake, right?"

"What?!" the man shouted.

I was surprised too. The man didn't believe that it was real? He knew that it was fake?

"You said you were from Osaka, and from your accent I can presume that

you're from the south side. In that case, why would you bring this tea bowl all the way to Kyoto? There are plenty of appraisers and pawn shops in Osaka, no?" Holmes asked, a smile rising to his lips. His tone of voice was very gentle, but it still packed a punch.

The man seemed stunned for a moment, and just when I thought he'd been overpowered, he bounced back, saying, "I-It was a coincidence. I just happened to be going to Kyoto, so I stopped by here."

"You *just happened* to come to Kyoto and you *just happened* to be carrying a Kizeto tea bowl? That's far too unnatural. You knew that the esteemed appraiser Seiji Yagashira had a grandson performing appraisals at an antique store in Teramachi-Sanjo as part of his training, right? As proof, you weren't the slightest bit surprised when I started doing the appraisal. Everyone who comes here is always surprised to see someone as young as me doing it."

I unconsciously nodded as I listened. It was true. The customers who brought antiques here were always surprised and doubtful when they found out that Holmes would be doing the appraisal despite still being a student. In fact, when I first saw him doing an appraisal, I was shocked for the same reason.

"You purposely targeted this store," Holmes continued. "Did you think a young apprentice would be easy to fool?" He looked down at the tea bowl again and smirked. "It looks like this tea bowl was taken to a blemisher after it was created."

"A blemisher?" I asked out loud without thinking.

Holmes opened his mouth to speak without looking away from the tea bowl. "There are people who will add 'blemishes' to new tea bowls to give them an aged feel. It's also called 'adding years.' Given a month, even a brand new tea bowl can be aged by around three hundred years. Someone associated with such a professional would be experienced with the counterfeit trade and deceiving inexperienced appraisers," he spoke as if talking to himself.

The man was taken aback and couldn't say anything in response. Holmes leaned towards him and pressed further, "You borrowed that suit to pretend to be rich, right? Unfortunately, the size doesn't fit you, and while the suit is fancy, your shoes are worn out. You happened to get your hands on forgeries and

succeeded in selling them for a high price to inexperienced appraisers. Then, when you found out there was a young, inexperienced appraiser in Kyoto's Teramachi-Sanjo, you decided to trick me too. Am I wrong?" He was still smiling, but in a terrifying way that sent chills down my spine.

"No, um...well," the man mumbled, sweating profusely. He must've been shaken since Holmes had completely blown his cover.

"Such a shame. I may be young, but I am most certainly *not* inexperienced enough to be fooled by such crass work." Holmes instantly put on an icy glare, and the man's face went pale. *Whoa, there it is—his angry Kyoto dialect! It's the advent of the dark Holmes!*

Holmes is always calm and kind—the pinnacle of good conduct. When I first met him, I thought he was a perfect, somewhat aloof person who was unlikely to get emotional. But after spending time with him, I learned that that wasn't the case. He's surprisingly unwilling to back down. He's considerate but does what he wants. And I recently found out that he's extremely scary when he's angry. When he's worked up, his polite friendliness disappears and his Kyoto accent comes out, revealing a terrifying side of him. I secretly call that "the dark Holmes."

The man who'd targeted that pitch-black Holmes grabbed his counterfeit tea bowl and cloth wrapping and fled the store.

After the man disappeared, Holmes whirled around to face me. "Ugh, the nerve. Aoi, sprinkle some salt, please!"

"Right away. Salt, you said?" Sprinkling salt is a purifying ritual practiced in the Shinto religion.

"Yes, salt."

I went into the back room, picked up some salt, and came back out. "Umm, the only salt we have right now is flavored salt for boiled eggs. Is it okay to use this? Isn't it kind of a waste?"

Holmes gaped for a moment before chuckling. "You're right. It *would* be a waste."

“That’s what I thought.”

“In that case, shall we boil some eggs?” he said, smiling happily. It looked like he was in a better mood now.

“I’m hungry, so that works for me.”

We took advantage of the lack of customers to make boiled eggs and have a coffee break.

“I feel more relaxed when I’m with you, Aoi,” Holmes said quietly, carefully peeling a boiled egg with his long fingers.

“Huh? How come?”

“Usually, coming into contact with a malicious forgery puts me in a bad mood for the rest of the day. But this time, when I saw you holding the flavored salt, I felt like a pot of boiling water that had its lid taken off so all the steam escaped.”

“What?” I inadvertently laughed. “But is it okay not to report that scammer to the police? There were appraisers that got tricked, right?”

“I know it sounds unsympathetic, but the fault lies with the appraisers who were deceived. He wasn’t scamming ordinary people, after all. However, I will of course report that such a thing happened.”

I see. So even if he purposely brought in a fake antique, it’s the appraiser’s job to spot it. It’s a battle between appraisers and counterfeiters.

“What about ‘reproductions,’ then? Those are imitations too, so could you call them counterfeits?” I asked.

“Reproductions are imitations made in good faith with the approval of the original creator. So, they don’t hide the fact that they’re reproductions, and they’re sold for a different price. The buyer is aware when they’re making their purchase.

“On the other hand, counterfeits are clumps of ill will, created to trick people and steal their money. I cannot accept such bad faith. It’s blasphemy towards the creators and appreciators of fine art.” Holmes scowled as he drank his coffee.

“You’re a sincere person, huh?” I murmured.

Holmes looked surprised. “Sincere? Who, me?”

“Yes.” I nodded firmly. It was clear that he truly hated counterfeits. He had to be a sincere person who couldn’t tolerate lies.

“No, I may despise counterfeits, but I have a twisted personality. At my core, I’m black-hearted.” He looked at me as if he had no idea what I was talking about, and I choked on my coffee. *B-Black-hearted?* “By the way, Aoi, do you have any plans for summer vacation?”

I looked back up in surprise at the unexpected question. “S-Summer vacation?” Why would he be asking that? Was he going to invite me to go somewhere? “N-No, I don’t have any plans. I can help out at the store as much as you want,” I said rapidly in my bewilderment. *Even if he was going to invite me out, it’d definitely be to a museum or art gallery for educational purposes,* I thought. Still, I couldn’t help but get excited.

Holmes made a relieved face and placed his hand on his chest. “Good. I’ll be spending the month of August in Europe with the owner.”

“Huh?”

“He handles appraisal requests from foreign art institutions as well as art acquisitions for hotels and whatnot. Every summer, we travel around overseas.”

“I see... You do those kinds of things too, huh?”

“Yes. Please take care of the store with my father during that time. Feel free to do your homework here, and any time you want a break, just let him know.” He sounded apologetic.

I felt all the strength leave my body. “Okay, no problem. Enjoy your trip to Europe.”

“I’m not sure if I’ll be able to enjoy being my grandfather’s errand boy, but I’ll buy you a souvenir.”

“Oh! I’ll look forward to it.” Easy-to-please as I was, my face immediately lit up. I took a bite out of a boiled egg.

“This is your second summer in Kyoto, right? Please enjoy it.”

“Okay. I’m thinking of seeing the Daimonji bonfires this year.”

“It’s called *Gozan no Okuribi*, Aoi. The five ceremonial mountain bonfires,” Holmes said, waving his index finger.

“Oh right, you’re not supposed to call it that in front of people from Kyoto.” In the Kanto region we know it as the Daimonji bonfires, but the official name is “Gozan no Okuribi.” It’s a festival where giant bonfires in various shapes are lit on five different mountains. The shapes are: the character for “Dai” (meaning “large”), the characters “Myo” and “Ho” (referring to a Buddhist term for wondrous teachings), a boat shape, a torii gate shape, and another “Dai.” Since “Dai” is used twice, one of them is called the “left Dai.”

“Exactly, you mustn’t say that.” He nodded firmly, and I couldn’t help but smile at the behavior I’d come to expect from him.

“I’m sorry. Come to think of it, um...”

“Yes?”

“Are you really black-hearted?” I asked, going back to what he said before.

“Were you not aware, Aoi? ‘Kyoto guys’ are black-hearted,” he said in his Kyoto accent, grinning confidently and placing his hand on his chest.

My eyes widened. The sight pierced straight through my heart, and I couldn’t come up with anything to say. *I might have a thing for black-hearted Kyoto guys*, I thought to myself, but don’t tell anyone that.

Thus passed another idle summer afternoon.

Chapter 1: The Philosophy of Perception

1

Summer break ended just as Kyoto's boiling heat let up ever so slightly. The new school semester had begun, but for the students, it was hard to get out of the vacation mood. Since the second-years would be taking university entrance exams next year, many of them seemed to have taken the "play until you drop" attitude this year, as you could tell from their tanned skin. The lazy atmosphere became more evident when lunch break came around.

"Huh, so you managed to settle things with your ex, Aoi?" remarked Kaori Miyashita in a loud voice. She'd come over from the class next door to hang out. We'd become friends through the Saio-dai harassment case, and out of all of my friends at this school, she was the only one who knew about my past and Holmes. We were fairly close. It'd been a while since we last saw each other, so we were catching up by the open window, appreciating the breeze.

"Yeah, although it got dragged out for a long time." I cast my eyes down after telling Kaori what happened during the Gion Festival, on yoi-yoi-yama, the second to last day before the main procession.

Last summer, I moved from Saitama to Kyoto due to family circumstances. I had a boyfriend in Saitama who I'd been going out with since middle school, and naturally, this meant that it became a long-distance relationship. A few months later, he finally told me he was breaking up with me. At first I figured I'd just have to accept it. Once we were separated, it was inevitable that our feelings would drift apart too. But it turned out that the real reason was that he started going out with my best friend...and the truth hit me hard. I wanted to rush right back to Saitama and confirm things with my own eyes, so I visited Teramachi-Sanjo's antique store "Kura," hoping to sell my late grandfather's hanging scrolls to pay for the train fare. That was back in March, when it was

still chilly.

There, I met Kiyotaka Yagashira, a mysterious young man who was nicknamed “Holmes.”

“Aoi, would you like to work here? Instead of selling off family treasures in secret, why don’t you work to earn your travel fare on your own?”

With his fearsome powers of observation, he saw through me completely and offered me a job. My interactions with him and with beautiful works of art healed my heart bit by bit, and my ex and best friend were now things of the past. I was about to give up on going back to Saitama, but on the night of the Gion Festival’s yoi-yoi-yama, I was forced to confront them. They were visiting from Saitama as part of a school trip. It wasn’t even remotely close to a clean resolution. All of my friends took their side, leaving me all alone. It was like lying on a bed of nails. Then, Holmes came to my rescue. He took my hand and pulled me away... I was truly saved.

“Let it all out. You deserve it.”

He gently patted my back with his large hand. When I recall how I cried into his broad chest under the light of the paper lanterns...my chest grows hot.

“Hey, do you have a crush on him?” Kaori asked, suddenly peeking into my face.

My heart skipped a beat. “Wh-What?”

“He saved you when you were in a bind! And it wouldn’t be strange to fall head over heels for *those* looks. My sister’s a huge fan of him.”

“Wh-What about you, Kaori?” I asked hesitantly.

She grimaced and shook her head. “Not me. He comes off as suspicious. My sister’s obsessed with him since she thinks he’s cool, but I was terrified when he saw through me.”

It was understandable for her to be scared, since she was on the receiving end of Holmes’s discerning eye during the Saio-dai case.

“So, do you, Aoi?”

“T-To be honest, he does make my heart race...but I was hurting because of my ex the whole time, so I’m not sure about my feelings.”

“Makes sense. But did you get closer to him over summer break?”

“No, he went overseas with the owner, and I was watching the store.”

“The owner? You mean that Seiji Yagashira?” Holmes’s grandfather, Seiji Yagashira, was a nationally certified appraiser and seemed to be quite famous in the city.

“Yeah. Apparently he has a bunch of work overseas, and he always brings Holmes with him during summer vacation.”

“Oh, I see. Holmes is his heir, after all.” Kaori nodded in understanding.

“Heir” was exactly right. The owner had worldwide influence in the fine art appraisal industry and endeavored to introduce his grandson and successor to as many people as possible. This wasn’t anything new—Holmes said he’d always been dragged overseas whenever he had a long break, and as a result, he couldn’t get much studying done. Come to think of it, when I first met him, he said he didn’t pass the entrance exam for Kyoto University because he was “playing with his grandfather.” Now I know what he meant.

“So, I spent summer break watching over Kura with the manager.”

“That’s a pretty sad vacation. Where’s the excitement in that?”

“It was nice and relaxing, though.” The manager doesn’t speak much, but he’s very kind, so I enjoy spending time with him.

“That means the manager has to watch the store and the house by himself, huh? Must be tough... Come to think of it, what kind of house does Holmes live in?”

I blinked at the sudden, unexpected question. “House?”

“He’s from the world of antiques, so I can imagine him living in one of those traditional old townhouses.”

“Oh, I see. That does suit him, since he’s a total Kyoto guy.” I nodded in agreement.

Kaori frowned dubiously. “Kyoto guy? Don’t you mean ‘Kyoto man’?”

Holmes said the same thing. I guess it bothers Kyoto people when I change up their traditional phrases.

“I know that’s the term, but Holmes feels more like a ‘Kyoto guy.’ ‘Kyoto man’ is a bit too strong, I think.”

“Oh, yeah, I see what you mean.” She nodded in understanding. *I guess people will accept modifications if they understand them.* “So, you don’t know what his house is like?” she asked, returning to the subject.

“No. I’ve never been there, and I’ve never even seen it.” I did know about the Yagashira family’s living situation, though. The owner’s house is near Ginkaku-ji, the manager’s apartment is near Yasaka Shrine, and Holmes goes between the two, taking care of them. He essentially has two homes.

“Oh, so they don’t all live together.” Kaori folded her arms in contemplation after hearing my explanation.

“I’m going to be visiting the owner’s house, though.”

“Nice! Tell me what it’s like.”

“I want you to come with me.”

“Huh?” Kaori balked. “Why me? No thanks, I don’t really want to see Holmes.” She shook her head fervently, as if rejecting the idea with her whole body.

“Wait, why not?”

“It’s scary how it feels like he’ll read my mind,” she said with a serious face.

I couldn’t help but laugh. “Yeah, he might, but it’s okay.”

“So he *does* read minds! Yikes. How are you okay with this, Aoi? It doesn’t make you uncomfortable?”

“M-Me? It gave me the chills at first, but I guess I’ve gotten used to it now. It’s nice because it speeds up conversations.”

“You’re *too* used to it if that’s what you think. Anyway, why me?” It was an understandable question.

“Well...it all started yesterday.”

Kaori gulped as I slowly began telling my story.

2

It was Sunday yesterday. Holmes had returned to Kura after being away for a month, and it felt much calmer in the store with him back. I realized that Kura really needed him, regardless of the fact that he was primarily a student. My own feelings had calmed down too.

I was working at a relaxed pace as usual when Holmes looked up from the accounting book as if he'd just remembered something. “Aoi, are you free next weekend?” he asked.

“Next weekend?” *But I always work here on the weekend...or so I thought,* but when I looked at the tabletop calendar, I remembered that Kura was closed next weekend—something that didn't happen very often. “Oh yeah, the store is closed next weekend, right?”

“Yes, that is the case.”

Kura didn't have any regularly scheduled days off. Judging from the lack of customers, I doubted their family made a living off of the sales, but they generally kept it open every day because “If we close the store, the shopping street will become lonelier.” So, it was unusual for Kura to be closed for an entire weekend. In fact, it was the first time I'd seen it happen.

I wonder why he's asking if I'm free? Feeling anxious, I turned around and said, “I don't have any plans.”

“Do you want to come over to my house? Oh, I mean my grandfather's.” Meaning the one near Ginkaku-ji.

“Huh?” My surprise was overtaken by delight, and I broke out into a grin. I was curious about what kind of place the Yagashira family lived in.

“If it's all right with you, please invite your friend Kaori too,” Holmes continued.

“Kaori?” I responded, confused. *Why would he ask me to invite Kaori? Is he*

interested in her? Is he using me as an excuse to invite her over? It was selfish of me, but I wasn't enthusiastic about being used that way.

As I stood there, ever so slightly worried, Holmes sighed and said, "Yes, the more people the merrier. Especially since that man loves women of all ages."

"That man?"

"Ah, you hadn't heard yet. We're holding a party for my grandfather to celebrate his seventy-seventh birthday." Seventy-seven is considered a special age in Japanese culture. When my late grandfather turned seventy-seven, my relatives all got together to celebrate it with him too. The owner was also turning seventy-seven... He was certainly energetic, or should I say powerful?

"Oh, congratulations."

"Thank you. It's using the traditional counting system where you're considered born at the age of one, so he's seventy-six in the modern system. He said he wanted to celebrate by having a party at his house, so we're inviting everyone we know.

"We'd love for you to come too, Aoi, but I think I'll be very busy that day, so you might feel more at ease if you have a friend with you."

I finally understood why Holmes wanted me to invite Kaori. It was going to be a birthday party with lots of guests, and since Holmes would be busy attending to things, there was a chance that I'd end up alone. Being the kind and attentive person that he is, he thought it'd be reassuring for me to bring a friend.

"O-Oh, okay. I'll invite Kaori."

"Good. The party will be on Saturday, starting in the afternoon."

"Saturday... Why is the store closed on Sunday too, then?"

"The party might continue into the morning." Holmes shrugged.

"I see," I said with a laugh. "If the party's starting in the afternoon, does that mean you'll be making preparations in the morning?" *It must be a lot of work to hold a party with so many guests. What about the food? Will Holmes be making everything himself?*

"Yes, but the catering will be handled by a traditional Japanese restaurant

that we're acquainted with. All I'll be doing is setting up."

So the food is catered. I'm sure it'll be fancy. In that case, he might be able to handle the preparations himself, but...

"Um, would you mind if I came in the morning to help you? I don't know how useful I'll be, but..." I asked tentatively.

"Huh?" Holmes blinked.

"Oh, sorry. I'd just get in the way, right?"

"No, not at all. But is that really okay with you?"

"Yes, of course."

Holmes hesitated for a moment before saying, "Thank you. Can I count on you for Saturday, then?"

"Yes!" I nodded enthusiastically.

"Really, thanks so much. You're too kind," Holmes said, reverting to his Kyoto accent. Caught off guard, I felt my cheeks flush.

3

"Oh, so it's the owner's seventy-seventh birthday!" Kaori's eyes lit up.

"It's Saturday afternoon, if you're interested. I'll be going in the morning to help set up, though."

"Sounds like fun. Count me in!"

"Thanks... I wasn't expecting this. I thought you'd say you weren't interested." Her immediate answer surprised me, and I put my hand on my chest in relief.

"I mean, it's a party for *Seiji Yagashira*! I bet there'll be all sorts of famous guests. You probably don't know since you moved here last year, but he was appearing on regional TV up until a couple years ago."

"Huh? I never heard about that."

"You know that show, *Heirloom Hunt*?"

Heirloom Hunt... It was a program where they appraised people's heirlooms.

It was pretty popular, but if I recall correctly, it ended a long time ago because they ran out of households that had enough of them...

Kaori continued, "It was really popular in Kansai, so they regularly had special programs here."

"Oh, really?"

"Seiji sometimes appeared on those programs as the appraiser, so he's famous across the region."

"I had no idea." *Geez, why didn't anyone tell me that? But now I see. People everywhere treat him like a huge deal, and that might be the power of television at work.*

"I didn't watch the show much since it's targeted at old people, but Seiji comes across as an influential, refined gentleman on TV, so he apparently captured the hearts of housewives everywhere."

"...A refined gentleman?" Apparently, the owner put on quite an act when he was on TV. I wasn't sure why, when his free-spirited personality probably would've been even more popular with the masses.

"So, there might be some real celebs coming!" Kaori's eyes lit up again.

"C-Celebs?" I was startled. *Now I'm nervous! What if celebrities really do come?!* Suddenly, a face came to mind. It was Akihito, the middle brother from a case Holmes and I had been involved with. Come to think of it, he was a performer too, and pretty good-looking at that. I felt my anxiety immediately disappear.

"I'm so excited!" Kaori smiled happily.

I was a bit taken aback. "Kaori, you're pretty fangirly, huh?" *I thought she was a more placid girl.*

"What do you mean? Everyone in Kyoto's more or less like this."

"Huh? Really?"

"Yep. A lot of them just try not to show it. We also love new things, pastries, Western food, and ramen!"

“There *are* a lot of bakeries and ramen restaurants around here.”

We exchanged looks and laughed.

4

Holmes was busy with the birthday party preparations and his schoolwork, so he didn't show up at Kura that week. It was mainly the manager who was on duty. The manager has a hard time staying in one place when he reaches an impasse in his writing, so ever since I started working here, he'd often dash out of the store. He seemed to have been making good progress lately, though. He stopped leaving and had been staying at the counter, concentrating solely on his manuscript. Even today, when I entered the store and said, “Good morning,” a while passed before he noticed me.

He's incredibly focused, but I'm not sure if that's a good thing when he's supposed to be tending to the store. I giggled and started cleaning—quietly so that I wouldn't bother him. With so many items for sale, dusting everything off was a struggle in itself. *Scratch, scratch* went the manager's pen as I cleaned. I didn't mind spending time like this.

The manager stopped writing and said, “All right,” as he stretched. It seemed like he'd reached a stopping point. I was still in the middle of cleaning, but I quickly went to the kitchenette and made coffee.

“Here you go,” I said, placing the cup on the counter with a *clink*.

The manager immediately looked up as if he'd just noticed my presence. “Oh, thank you, Aoi.” He smiled warmly.

“Did you reach a stopping point in your manuscript?”

“Yes. I was asked to write a short story, and I just finished.”

“Congratulations.”

“Thank you,” the manager murmured, slowly bringing the coffee cup to his mouth. His mannerisms were really similar to Holmes's at times like this.

Noticing my gaze, the manager looked at me curiously and asked, “Is something wrong?”

“No, I was just thinking about how the owner’s party is soon.”

The manager looked at the tabletop calendar and sighed weakly. “You’re right.” He didn’t look too excited.

“Are you too busy with work?”

“No, the problem is that I don’t like appearing in public. Since it’s my father’s birthday, I’ll have to give a speech, right? When I’m too nervous, my stomach hurts.” He sighed again, dejectedly. It might’ve been rude of me, but I couldn’t help but think he was kind of cute like that. This was one aspect where he was completely different from Holmes and the owner. The owner had made TV appearances, yet the manager couldn’t even handle a birthday speech.

“Come to think of it, I heard from my friend that the owner used to be on TV. Is that true?”

“Yes. Actually, you didn’t know?”

“I had no idea. No one told me.”

“My apologies. I suppose it’s common knowledge around here. Besides, his final appearance was two years ago.”

“He doesn’t go on TV anymore?”

“He still receives requests, but he turns them down.”

“It kind of seems like a waste. I wish I could’ve seen him on TV.” *Oh well.*

The manager chuckled and said, “He was much more composed on TV. It was like watching a completely different person.”

“My friend told me that too. Why is he turning down TV requests now?”

“Ah, well...some things happened,” the manager said evasively.

I looked at him curiously, but suddenly, the door chime rang.

“Oh, what a nice store! It’s like an antique cafe.”

“I’m looking for ceramic cups.”

Two customers entered the store. They seemed to be tourists.

I hurriedly turned towards the door and put on my customer-facing smile.

“Welcome! Take your time looking around.”

5

And then it was Saturday. I was going to meet Holmes at 9:00 a.m. at the entrance to the Philosopher’s Walk, a path that passes by several shrines and temples. To get there, I simply have to go all the way east on Imadegawa Street until I reach a north-south road called Shirakawa Street. Right past there is the entrance to the Philosopher’s Walk.

I could take the bus, but since it’s within biking distance, I’ll bike there, I thought, but I soon regretted it. Past East Oji Street it was an uphill slope all the way! It was painful to say the least. *I’m sure the way back will be a breeze, though.* I diligently pedaled away. My present for the owner rattled around in the bike basket. It was a famous brand of sake from Saitama called “Tenranzan.” Since I didn’t know what to give a world-class connoisseur, I asked my mom. She said that sake would be a safe choice and helped me order it.

Pedaling with all my might, I finally reached the top of the slope. There I could see a small bridge with a sign that said “Jodoji Bridge,” and to the right, the wooden sign saying “Philosopher’s Walk.” Holmes was standing on the bridge, smiling and waving at me. My eyes were instinctively drawn to his clothes: a shirt and jeans, making for a casual and crisp look.

I crossed the street and got off my bike when I reached the bridge. “S-Sorry for making you wait.”

“So you did come by bike. I see you survived the Imadegawa slope.” He chuckled and handed me an unopened sports drink. He must’ve gotten it knowing that I’d come by bike. Yet again, I was impressed by his intuition and preparation skills.

“Thanks. I thought it’d be fine distance-wise, but I never expected such a long slope.” I twisted open the bottle and gulped the drink down, feeling it seep through my tired body.

“Since you live on the north side, if you were coming by bike, then it might’ve been easier to take North Oji Street and then turn south onto Shirakawa

Street.”

“What? You should’ve told me that sooner!” I looked at him in anger.

“I should’ve,” Holmes said with a laugh. “Well then, let’s go. Oh, I’ll push your bike for you.” He grabbed the handlebars and started walking slowly, pushing the bike.

“Thanks...” I quietly followed behind him, impressed again by his charms.

Trees lined both sides of the Biwako Canal, their leaves tinged slightly red. These were all cherry blossom trees. *I’m sure this place must look gorgeous in the spring.* The leaves rustled in the wind as if matching the tranquil sound of the water flowing through the canal. There were fancy cafes all around us too, and I felt kind of excited. The Philosopher’s Walk really was the most ideal place for thinking while taking a relaxing stroll. It was wonderful.

“Is the house close to here?”

“It’s a bit of a walk, but yes.”

“I see. I’m looking forward to it.” *What kind of house will it be? The owner’s always wearing a kimono, so is it going to be a traditional Japanese-style house? It must be big, since he can hold a party there. Ahh, I’m so excited.*

“I have to do my best to help too,” I murmured to myself, clenching my fist.

Holmes gave me an apologetic look. “Sorry, I already finished the setup last night and this morning.”

“Wh-What?”

“Since you came all this way, I was thinking of showing you around Ginkaku-ji. What do you think? Have you been there before?” he asked with an awkward smile.

“Ginkaku-ji...” Meaning “Temple of the Silver Pavilion,” it’s a Zen Buddhist temple near the entrance to the Philosopher’s Walk. “I went there on a school trip in middle school, but I don’t remember much. I do remember the Philosopher’s Walk, though. But since we went to Kinkaku-ji first, I was disappointed that Ginkaku-ji wasn’t silver,” I said with a shrug. Kinkaku-ji, the “Temple of the Gold Pavilion,” is one of the most popular tourist destinations in

Kyoto because its top two stories are covered in pure gold leaf.

Holmes nodded as if he'd expected that answer. "Many people say that, but Ginkaku-ji has its charms too. The temple itself isn't silver, but it has the austere feeling of oxidized silver."

"Oxidized silver...?"

"Yes. For example, if my hearty and flamboyant grandfather is Kinkaku-ji, then my calm and graceful father is Ginkaku-ji."

His metaphor came out of nowhere, but I laughed at how easy to understand it was. "Y-Yeah, the owner does seem luxurious like Kinkaku-ji!" I exclaimed excitedly. "Now I want to see Ginkaku-ji again, if it resembles the manager so much."

"Let's go, then." Holmes smiled.

We continued on the Philosopher's Walk and turned left, taking the north path to Ginkaku-ji. It was a narrow road that could barely fit a car, and it was packed tightly with souvenir shops.

"Wow, this reminds me of Ninenzaka—the street that goes towards Kiyomizudera Temple."

Holmes nodded while pushing my bike. "This one is smaller, but still fun to pass through."

It was early in the morning, so there weren't many people around, and many of the stores were still closed. It'd probably get pretty busy here starting around noon. There were also some stylish cafes that I wanted to try visiting sometime.

"Holmes, have you been to that cafe?" I asked, looking towards one of them.

"Huh?" He looked at me with a surprised face.

His reaction confused me. "Did I say something wrong?"

"That was a silly question, Aoi."

"Wh-What?"

"Sorry, that was too harsh. I actually love cafes. I think I've probably been to every cafe in Kyoto," he said with a confident look.

Now it was me who was surprised. “Wait, really? Do you remember every single cafe in the city?”

“Yes, I keep records of my impressions of all of them.”

“W-Wow.”

“One day, I want to release a book called ‘*The Kyoto Cafe Guide*.’”

“Oh, that would be amazing!”

“No, I was just kidding.”

“D-Don’t make such believable jokes!” *H-How do I put this... Holmes really is weird!*

“The book was a joke, but after I finish grad school, I want to turn Kura into an antique cafe. Our store isn’t very welcoming in its current state, right? If it were a cafe, people would be able to come in more easily and see all of the antiques.”

“I see. That sounds like a great idea too. A cafe is something you can visit casually.”

“Thank you. I might need a lot of help when that happens, so I’ll be counting on you.” He smiled gently.

My heart skipped a beat. *How many years later will that be? Am I allowed to keep working there until then?*

“O-Okay, I’ll do my best.”

“But now that I think about it, that’s still a long way off.” Holmes laughed. My heart wouldn’t stop racing.

We leisurely continued walking. It wasn’t a long road, so we soon arrived at Ginkaku-ji, parked my bike, and stepped onto the temple grounds. By the way, “Ginkaku-ji” is actually a nickname. The temple’s real name is “Higashiyama Jisho-ji”—Higashiyama being “Eastern Mountain” and a style of Japanese culture, and Jisho-ji meaning “Temple of Shining Mercy.”

Next thing I knew, Holmes had paid the entrance fee for us and was handing me a ticket, which also doubled as a good luck charm. “Here you go.”

“Thank you. Um, why is Ginkaku-ji called the ‘Temple of the Silver Pavilion’ even though it’s not made with silver?”

“Ah, well, Ginkaku-ji was founded by Yoshimasa Ashikaga, the eighth shogun of the Muromachi period. When he built this Higashiyama mountain villa, he referenced Kinkaku-ji, which was built by his grandfather, Yoshimitsu Ashikaga. Since this multi-storied building was called ‘Ginkaku,’ the whole temple became known as ‘Ginkaku-ji.’” The ease with which Holmes pulled from his vast knowledge never failed to impress me.

We continued further inside and immediately came upon the black lacquer temple, which was formally known as Kannon-den. I could really feel the austerity of its calm appearance. I didn’t feel anything when I saw it in middle school...or, well, I was actually disappointed back then. But this time, after being told beforehand that it had the austere feeling of oxidized silver, I could certainly tell. It wasn’t flashy, but it was peaceful, gentle, absolutely elegant...and *austere*.

“I-It really is the manager, Holmes!” I exclaimed, turning back to look at him. The people around us stared at me, and I hurriedly covered my mouth.

“It’s an austere, oxidized silver temple, right?”

“Yes. It has an appeal that you can’t understand until you’re older, I think. I didn’t understand it when I was in middle school.”

“You’ve grown up, then,” Holmes said in a serious tone. My cheeks flushed. There it was—his wicked attack.

“D-Don’t say that. Anyway, you compared the manager to Ginkaku-ji and the owner to Kinkaku-ji, but which temple would *you* be?”

“Me? I’m not worthy of being one. But I will say that my favorite temple is Kiyomizu-dera. It also has the same ‘Kiyo’ from my name, ‘Kiyotaka.’” Holmes’s eyes lit up as he gazed into the distance, placing his hand on his chest.

Oh, Kiyomizu-dera Temple is nice... Before I knew it, I was squinting into the distance too.

“As much as I like it, I wouldn’t say that I *am* it. Let’s stop staring into the distance, all right?”

“Huh? Really?”

“Yes. It would be presumptuous to call myself Kiyomizu-dera Temple.”

We continued along the path, making idle conversation and laughing. The route going around the temple grounds was longer than expected. *D-Do we really have to walk this much?* I felt a bit out of breath.

After climbing all of the stone steps, we were looking down at the rows of low rooftops making up the city of Kyoto. There weren't many tall buildings—this city really was surrounded by mountains.

“W-Wow, what an amazing view.”

“This is Kyoto as seen from the eastern mountain. Impressive, right?”

“Right! I don't feel tired at all anymore!”

Under the blue sky, the fresh autumn breeze gently caressed my skin. The city of Kyoto had another different aesthetic when overlooked from the east...

“I'm glad I came, Holmes. I love Ginkaku-ji now,” I said, turning around. Holmes looked extremely happy, and the sight caught me off guard. My heart skipped a beat.

“That's good. I love Ginkaku-ji too. I think it has a bit of a disadvantage because of its nickname.”

“You might be right...”

“So, I'm happy that you came to like it, Aoi.” Holmes smiled. It always seemed like he felt responsible for promoting Kyoto. “Now then, we should get going.”

“Oh, right.” We had a party to get to. “Come to think of it, the owner has been on TV before, right?” I asked as we descended the hill.

Holmes nodded. “Yes, it was quite often until two years ago.”

“Why doesn't he do it anymore?” When I asked the manager this, it didn't seem like he wanted to answer.

“Two years ago, he appeared on a program called *Heirloom Hunt* ☆ *Autumn Special*, and there was a bit of a problem. After that, he said that TV was too much hassle.”

“A problem?” I couldn’t help but be anxious.

“Aoi, have you heard of the magician named Don Kageyama?”

“Yes, of course. He’s famous, right?” So famous that anyone would nod to that. He’s called the “Magician King of the Heisei Era,” and he’s an influential figure in the entertainment industry. He’s also known for his harsh tongue and often appears on news programs as a commentator. Despite his arrogant image, he also does a lot of charity work, so he has the aura of a counselor who’s allowed to speak without restraint.

“Don Kageyama brought an heirloom onto the show. It was a blue and white ceramic vase from the Tang dynasty, and it would’ve been worth an incredible sum if it were genuine. It was going to be the centerpiece of the show. However, when my grandfather was checking the antiques before filming began, he determined that it was a fake, sending all of the staff into an uproar.

“The producer asked him, ‘For the sake of the show, can you say that it’s real?’ but naturally, my grandfather wouldn’t budge. They didn’t have a choice but to go on with the filming. When he declared that the vase was a fake, Don Kageyama said, ‘Your eyes are worthless,’ and the audience went wild.

“The entire part with Don Kageyama was cut from the show, and my grandfather was furious at how it was made out to be his fault. He said, ‘I’ll never go on TV again!’ That’s the gist of it.”

“I-I see.” It was a very in-character story for the owner. I was impressed.

“The public doesn’t know about it since it wasn’t broadcast, but it was apparently a big uproar behind the scenes.”

“So that’s what happened.” *The world of television really is a tough place.* But if he caused an uproar, then maybe there wouldn’t be any celebrities at the party. I felt a bit relieved, but at the same time, I felt sorry for Kaori who was looking forward to it... *Oh, but I’m sure Akihito will come, so that might work. He is a handsome actor, after all.* Feeling saved by his existence once again, I left Ginkaku-ji with Holmes.

We walked back the way we came, with Holmes pushing my bike again.

“His house is this way,” he said after a short while, turning onto a small road.

“I’m looking forward to seeing what it’s like.” I followed behind him, excited to find out. *Will it be like a temple? Or maybe it’s a traditional townhouse?*

“It’s over there.”

I looked at where he was pointing and felt lost for words. I’d have thought that building was a museum or something. It was a dignified, Western-style manor built out of gray stone that made it look like it was from the Meiji era. It felt like the kind of cultural heritage site you’d see in port towns like Yokohama and Otaru.

It’s, like, not Japanese-style at all!

“I-It’s amazing.” That was putting it lightly. It wasn’t huge or anything, but it was an imposing estate. It really did look like a small museum.

“It originally belonged to my grandfather’s uncle, who was his teacher.”

The black iron gate creaked as it opened.

“The owner’s uncle was a teacher?”

“Yes. He was a wealthy merchant as well as an extremely skilled appraiser of fine art. Or rather, it may be that his success was a result of his discerning eye. He had this house built so that he could decorate it with his collection for guests to see.”

In other words, it was originally designed for displaying art. No wonder the building itself looked like a museum.

“My grandfather said that he moved here in his forties, after his teacher formally appointed him as his successor and retired.”

“The teacher left the house to his nephew instead of his children?”

“He didn’t have any children of his own. Apparently he made it known that it would be given to the most fitting heir among all of his relatives and students. My grandfather said that he gave it everything he had in order to be chosen from among all of his rivals.”

“I-I see...” *This estate is like a crown he fought to win...*

Unexpectedly, surrounding the Western-style stone manor was a Japanese-style garden.

“It’s mismatched, right? My grandfather says he prefers the aesthetic of Japanese-style gardens. It’s designed so that you can enjoy elements of all four seasons.”

“Yeah, it might be mismatched, but it fits well when you look at it like this. It’s really nice.” It was a perfect blend of Japanese and Western styles. Now that I think about it, Kura was a fusion of East and West too. *Maybe that’s one of the characteristics of the Yagashira family.*

“This way, Aoi.”

“Oh, okay.” While I was thinking, Holmes had parked my bike at the edge of the yard. We walked up the stone stairs and he opened the large double front doors, revealing an atrium.

“O-Ooh.” I anxiously stepped inside. There was a grandfather clock and an extravagant chandelier. Paintings, vases, and sculptures lined the walls—it really did feel like an art museum.

“Um, where do I put my shoes? Am I supposed to keep them on here?”

“Keep them on for the first floor, then switch to slippers for the second floor.”

“Huh?”

“This first floor is generally used as a space for displaying art to guests.”

“Oh, I see.” So in a way, it really *was* a museum.

Once we stepped into the hall, an inner door opened and a beautiful woman wearing a chic black dress came out, saying “Welcome back, Kiyotaka.” She had chestnut curls and wore vermilion lipstick. There was an alluring mole near her mouth, and she had a slim yet curvy figure that was highlighted by her dress. She also wore bright red high heels. She was beautiful in every way, down to the shine of her hair. Age-wise...she was probably in her late twenties or early thirties?

Wh-Who is this? Is she Holmes’s girlfriend?

“Thank you, Yoshie. You seem to be all set.”

“You need to start getting ready too, Kiyotaka,” she chided, crossing her arms. It didn’t seem like she was his girlfriend. As I stood there intimidated by the two of them, she looked at me and smiled warmly. “Hello there. My name is Yoshie Takiyama. It’s nice to meet you.”

“H-Hello. I’m Aoi Mashiro.” I didn’t really know what was going on, but I introduced myself and bowed.

“I heard about you from Seiji. He said the store got an adorable, hard-working part-timer. Good for you, Kiyotaka.” The woman smiled happily.

Holmes nodded. “Yes, I’m lucky to have her.”

This is kind of embarrassing...but more importantly, who is this person? Before I could wonder more, the inner door opened again, and this time the owner came out.

“Thanks for today, Aoi.” He usually wore a stylish kimono, but today was different—he had a tuxedo on instead.

“Congratulations, Owner. Um, here’s a little something for you. It’s sake from Saitama,” I said, handing him the gift-wrapped box.

The owner made a wrinkly smile. “Thanks, dear. Kind of you.”

“Oh, it’s nothing. You’re wearing Western clothes today, huh? I’ve never seen you dressed this way before.”

“Nice, right? I’ll be wearing a kimono later, though.”

“Are you changing clothes as part of the ceremony?”

“Yep.”

The owner really was flashy, having a costume change like a bride at a wedding reception.

Yoshie eagerly walked up to him and said, “You look wonderful in Western clothes too, Seiji.” She gazed fondly at him.

“Don’t I?” A proud smile rose to the owner’s face.

Okay but really, who is this person? I tilted my head again.

Holmes noticed my confusion and whispered in my ear, “Yoshie is my grandfather’s girlfriend.”

“G-Girlfriend?” I squeaked.

“Surprised?”

“Y-Yes. That’s a really big age gap, right?”

“Indeed, there is a gap...but while she looks young, she’s in her forties.”

“N-No way!”

“I affectionately refer to her as a witch.”

Her youthful appearance is witch-tier.

“She manages a company that does art-related event consulting, and our store does business with them as well. She started dating my grandfather around ten years ago, but since both of them are self-centered, it’s a constant cycle of breaking up and getting back together. They just can’t get rid of each other.”

“O-Oh... That’s an interesting relationship.” I looked at Yoshie and the owner, dumbfounded. Now that I knew the owner had such a beautiful girlfriend, I felt like I understood the secret to his youth. “That aside, he must be really enthusiastic about this event if he’s even going to do a costume change...”

“Indeed. Just for today, he ordered a tailor-made suit and shoes from a shop in Yokohama, a hat from an artisan in Kobe, and a kimono from Miyashita Kimono Fabrics.”

I gaped. *This is that grand of a party? Yoshie’s wearing a beautiful dress too, but here I am in casual clothes, since I thought I was going to be helping set up!*

...Then again, Holmes was dressed casually too.

“Holmes, are you wearing that to the party?”

“No, I’m going to change later.”

“C-Can I go home and change?”

“No, you’re lovely as you are.”

“Stop it with those empty compliments...”

“I mean it.”

Yoshie walked over and said, “Don’t worry.” She must’ve heard our conversation. “I have plenty of dresses, so I’ll lend you one. Come, let’s get changed.”

“Huh?”

“This way.” Yoshie grabbed my hand and pulled me into another room before I could even react.

“Pink, white, or light blue? Which do you like?” Yoshie asked cheerfully, opening her suitcase.

“Oh, um...light blue?” My face stiffened. I was still bewildered.

“Let’s go with pink. It’s a special occasion, after all.”

“I-I don’t know about pink...”

“Don’t worry. It’s light pink, not dark.” She showed me a dress that was pale pink—almost white. The design was simple but cute.

“That’s a lovely dress,” I said sincerely.

Yoshie giggled. “I brought the kind of dresses that young people would like, thinking you’d be able to make use of them.”

“Wait, really? Thank you very much.” *Huh, maybe everyone who’s spent a long time with the Yagashira family is considerate like this.*

“It’s my pleasure. I’ve been looking forward to meeting you, Aoi. So once again, nice to meet you.”

“O-Oh. Nice to meet you too.”

“Isn’t it unique how the Yagashira family doesn’t have any women in it?”

“I-I guess.”

“I’m sure you have to put up with a lot too when you’re dealing with those men. Feel free to vent.”

“Huh...?” *Have I been putting up with anything?* It was startling when the manager suddenly dashed out of the store because he hit a block in his writing, but that wasn’t really a problem. Holmes was wicked from time to time, but he was always good to me.

After thinking for a bit, I answered, “No, there hasn’t been anything.” *If I don’t have any pent-up frustrations, does that mean I haven’t known them long enough to form deep relationships?* “What kinds of things have you been putting up with, Yoshie?”

“For me, there’s the antiques.”

“The antiques?”

“He talks on and on about them, and he forgets I exist when he starts looking at them. And then he’ll suddenly fly overseas to look at them!” She leaned forward as she spoke, and I was taken aback. *I see. That would be frustrating from a girlfriend’s point of view.* “Seiji’s passion for antiques is abnormal. There was a time when he was so obsessed with one that it made me want to break it.”

“R-Really?”

“I wouldn’t actually do it. It’s just annoying that he’s more interested in them than me,” she huffed, crossing her arms. I could tell that she really did love the owner, and it was so heartwarming that I couldn’t help but smile.

“But you fell for him and his love for antiques, right?”

Yoshie hesitated for a moment. “Yes, at first. I respected his ability as an appraiser. But more than that, I’m a ‘grave robber.’”

“A what?”

“Oh, do kids these days call it something else? I’m into older men who are past middle age. So, Seiji’s looks were exactly my type.”

“I see!” *It all makes sense now.*

“But Seiji always loved antiques more than he loved me, and besides, he loves his freedom, so I can’t get a hold of him. I’ve given up on him many times to find someone else, but whenever we did break up and I went on dates with

others, it just made me appreciate him even more! The Yagashira men are just so *intense*, right?”

“Yeah...they are.” I could definitely agree with that.

“Right! Their good sides and bad sides are all so intense—it’s too much!”

“I think I know what you mean.” I, too, had gotten accustomed to Holmes’s quirks despite being put off by them.

“Ahh, I knew it’d be a good idea to talk to you! None of my friends understand, you see.”

That makes sense. Only people who know the Yagashira family well would know.

“I’m really looking forward to getting to know you better. Tell me all of your complaints,” Yoshie said happily.

I couldn’t help but smile. “Okay, I’ll make sure to do that.” At first glance, I’d thought she was a sensual woman that I wouldn’t be able to talk to, but I was glad to find out that she seemed to be a really nice person.

We shook hands and then she said, “Okay, let’s get you changed!” I wasn’t sure how to respond to her enthusiasm, but I quickly got swept up by her pushiness and changed into the light pink dress. She tied my hair in an updo, saying “Oh, you have a lovely neck. This is a powerful weapon!” and even did my makeup, saying “See? Just lifting your eyelashes completely changes how you look. Let’s give you some light lipstick, too.”

When she was all done, she clapped her hands. “I knew you’d be adorable this way!”

I was embarrassed, but my reflection in the mirror really did look like a different person.

“Ahh, girls are great. My son is cute too, but I wish I had a girl.” She sighed passionately.

“Huh?” I turned around, surprised. “You have a child, Yoshie?”

“Yes, I’m once divorced. I have a son who’s a high school first-year, but he’s studying abroad.”

“A-A first-year?” *That’s one year younger than me. I can’t believe she has a son that old! Oh, but then again, if she’s in her forties, then that’s not strange. I got thrown off by her appearance.*

“Between my son, Seiji, Takeshi, and Kiyotaka, I’m surrounded by men. So, I’m very happy to be able to get along with you, Aoi.” She smiled cheerfully, looking absolutely gorgeous.

“Y-You look so young. It’s hard for me to believe you have a son in high school,” I said earnestly.

Yoshie laughed. “Seiji loves beauty, so I’m trying my best. It’s for my own sake, though. Not his.”

Those words rang through my heart. *It’s amazing to be able to work so hard for the person you love, but it’s also admirable to be able to say that it’s for your own sake.*

“By the way, Seiji and I both love ourselves,” she added at the end. *I can tell, I whispered in my heart.*

7

When we left the room, guests had already arrived and were chattering away in the hall. The first people I noticed were some familiar faces: Ueno, Mieko, and Akihito.

“My stage play just had its final day last week, so I’m going back to Tokyo the day after tomorrow. I’m glad I get to come to the owner’s party first,” said Akihito, who looked sharp in his party suit. He was as frivolous as ever, but at least he looked good on the outside. *Phew, so he did come. This should satisfy Kaori.*

Relieved, I looked around at the rest of the guests. Next to Akihito was a middle-aged man wearing a suit and light-colored sunglasses. He had a well-kept beard and vaguely seemed like he was from the entertainment industry.

“Oh, that’s Producer Shimizu!” Yoshie exclaimed. *So he was from the industry!*

“Is he the producer of *Heirloom Hunt*?”

“Yes. Seiji used to work with him, but I thought they weren’t in contact anymore...” she murmured, as if she hadn’t expected him to be here. She must not have heard about him ever since the dispute two years ago.

Next to the producer were two familiar-looking people.

“Oh, could those two be the entertainers, ‘Masamune’?” Yoshie remarked.

Suddenly, it came to me. “Yeah, that’s Masamune.” They were a performing duo who wowed their audiences with acts like pantomiming. They even performed overseas. Since their names were Masataka and Muneyoshi, their duo was called Masamune.

“Is the owner friends with Masamune?”

“I don’t know... They’ve probably never met. I’m sure Shimizu must’ve brought them here. I’m going to go greet them.” Yoshie headed towards the owner, who was cheerfully chatting up his guests. I could see Akihito blatantly ogling her. *She must be his type. I bet he’ll be surprised if he finds out she’s in her forties and dating the owner,* I thought, giggling.

“Did something funny happen?” came Holmes’s voice from beside me.

“Oh, no. But Akihito—” Turning around, the sight of Holmes in a formal suit made my heart skip a beat. The sleek, jet black attire went amazingly well with his shiny black hair, refined facial features, and slightly pale skin. On top of that, there was his graceful demeanor and his gentle smile. *This must be what the young aristocrats of the Meiji and Taisho eras looked like.*

What am I going to do with myself? He’s too amazing! I was a bit frustrated that he was making my heart race so much.

“You caught me off guard. Did Yoshie do your hair and makeup?” Holmes asked, looking genuinely surprised.

“Oh, yes. She did it for me in addition to lending me the dress. D-Do I look weird?” I looked up at him, feeling uncertain.

“...You look beautiful. It suits you well,” he answered in a Kyoto accent. His words pierced straight through me. *U-Using that accent here is not fair.*

As I stood there, more and more guests arrived, and Holmes would immediately go to greet them. The ones I somewhat knew were Yanagihara, who was the owner's appraiser friend, and Hanamura, the ikebana teacher I met before at Kyoto Hotel Okura. There were also many people who I was told were the owner's cousins. *Were they once his rivals?*

"Aoi!"

I turned to the familiar voice and saw Kaori with her parents. As you'd expect from their family business, they were all wearing kimono.

"Oh, Kaori!"

"In the end, my family was invited anyway. Sis didn't come though, since she's doing a TV interview."

"Yeah, I wondered if that'd be the case when I heard that the owner ordered a tailor-made kimono from Miyashita Kimono Fabrics. You look great in your kimono!" It was a semi-formal kimono, deep red with maple leaves. Naturally, she wore it well.

"Thanks. You look great too! Hey, is that hot guy over there an actor? And even Masamune's here! Oh my gosh!" She excitedly grabbed my hand. Seeing her look at Akihito, I smiled. *She really is a fangirl.*

Then the manager showed up and stood in front of the large doors that had "Showroom" written on a nameplate. He bowed before everyone and said, "Thank you everyone for coming to my father's birthday party today." His voice was ever so slightly shrill—he must've been nervous. He bowed again. Everyone stopped talking and turned to face him.

"Th-This house was originally the personal art gallery of Kuranosuke Yagashira, keen-eyed merchant and teacher to my father. The Yagashira family's prized collection is on display here, in this showroom. P-Please take a look before mealtime," the manager said stiffly. He then opened the large double doors with a *clank*.

"Ooh!" The guests walked towards the showroom, starry-eyed.

"It's the owner's collection! C'mon, Aoi!" Kaori looked excited.

“Yeah!” I nodded, and we went into the showroom together.

I only took one step inside before I was rendered speechless. *It wouldn't be an exaggeration to call this a small museum.* The Renaissance-style parlor was decorated with numerous works of art. Paintings and scrolls adorned the walls, while round tables were placed at fixed intervals, holding ceramic jars, flower vases, pitchers, and large plates.

“My, they're all fantastic.”

“Seiji's really something.”

The guests were enchanted.

“We ask that you please do not touch anything,” the manager cautioned nervously.

Holmes was standing in front of the jar on the table farthest back in the room, explaining it to the guests. It was a smooth, jade green piece.

“This is called ‘celadon’—or ‘seiji’ in Japanese—and it originated in China. It's one of my grandfather's most prized antiques. The Chinese are known for their mastery of celadon pottery. Its simple yet sublime beauty and its abundant grace are said to embody the aesthetic sense of the Chinese people. There are only a few dozen pieces like this one confirmed to exist in the world. It was originally discovered by my grandfather's teacher, Kuranosuke, in mainland China. It's an incredible, priceless piece, so please take this opportunity to admire it,” Holmes cheerfully explained.

I can't believe something like this would be in a normal house! (Okay, maybe “normal” isn't the right word.) I was simultaneously impressed and appalled.

After Holmes finished his overview of the collection, he whispered into the manager's ear, “Dad, I'm going to check on the party room.” He then left the showroom. *This exhibition must be to buy time until the food is ready.*

As I watched him leave, Akihito walked up to me, grinning from ear to ear.

“Hey there, Aoi. You're looking mature today. I like it.”

“Thank you, Akihito.”

Next to him was the pantomime duo, Masamune.

“Wow, it’s the entertainer team,” Kaori said quietly, her eyes sparkling with joy.

I quickly introduced her. “Akihito, this is my friend, Kaori Miyashita. Her family runs Miyashita Kimono Fabrics.”

“Oh, I see. That’s why you look so lovely in that kimono. I’m glad to meet a high school girl who can wear traditional clothes so nicely.” Akihito took her hand, radiating charm.

“I-It’s no big deal.” Kaori looked down, blushing.

Akihito was being his usual frivolous self, but I let it slide since Kaori seemed to enjoy it. I heard the manager call my name. He walked up to me quickly and said, “Sorry, I have to leave for a bit. When the guests are called to the party room, could you make sure to lock this room before you leave?” He handed me an antique-looking key.

“Oh, okay. I will.” I accepted the key, and the manager hurriedly left the showroom. *What could’ve happened?* He looked pale, so maybe the nervousness was making his stomach hurt, like he’d told me before. *I feel like I’ve been given a huge responsibility, though... I mean, isn’t this room full of amazing works of art?* Holding the key was making me feel anxious.

Then, one of the members of Masamune, Masataka, went “Whoa!” and looked up at the ceiling. “I just noticed that chandelier.”

We looked up at the chandelier. It was made up of countless shining crystals, and the design looked like it belonged in a palace’s party hall.

“You’re right. How Renaissance.”

“Yeah, I bet this chandelier’s worth a fortune, too.”

“Wow!”

We looked up at the ceiling, sighing in awe.

“The party room is ready. Please head over now, everyone,” came the manager’s voice from the other side of the doors.

“It’s finally party time! I’m excited.”

The smiling guests streamed out of the room. I walked with them, but stopped in front of the doors. Kaori, Akihito, and the Masamune duo left the showroom. With no one left inside, I locked the doors tightly. I tried turning the doorknob to make sure, and satisfied that they were locked, I headed for the party room.

At the time, I had no idea whatsoever about the shocking incident that was going to occur.

8

I entered the party room. There were waiters in white clothes and a spread of Japanese, Chinese, and Western food was laid out on long tables covered in white tablecloths. It was like a hotel buffet.

“Wow, it all looks so good!” I exclaimed.

“I’m ready to stuff my face. Holmes, can we start eating yet?” Kaori asked.

We looked at the food, starry-eyed. Holmes smiled at us and said, “My grandfather is going to give an extremely long speech now, and I believe there’ll be a toast after that. Once that’s done, you can eat as much as you want.”

An “extremely long speech”... Kaori and I exchanged glances.

“It’s a buffet, huh? You said the catering was being handled by a traditional Japanese restaurant, so I was expecting something different,” I said, looking around the hall.

Holmes nodded. “Yes, I think this format works best for parties. I was surprised, though.”

“Huh?”

“Right when the preparations were finished and I was about to go to the showroom to call over the guests, everyone suddenly came in.”

“Yes, the manager said the party room was ready.”

“My father said that...?” Holmes asked dubiously. Then the owner, who was standing in the middle of the hall, cleared his throat. Everyone stopped their

conversations and gave him their attention.

“Thank you everyone for coming to celebrate my seventy-seventh birthday,” his speech began. Just like Holmes said, it was...really long. He talked about how much hardship he went through to inherit the Yagashira manor, how deep his love for art was, and even the shock he felt the first time he encountered a Shino tea bowl...

“And now, I’m turning seventy-seven. I’ve only made it this far because of the support from my family and friends. Thank you very much. Cheers!”

It was finally time for the toast. Relieved, we all shouted “Cheers!” and raised our glasses.

“You’re still going strong, huh? I’ve been thinking of asking you to come back to TV,” I heard the producer say.

“Shimizu, I know I owe you for all the trouble I caused, but I ain’t going on TV ever again,” the owner said sullenly.

“Don’t say that. There’s talk of an *Heirloom Hunt* remake.”

“Today’s a happy occasion. I don’t want to get angry, so don’t talk to me about work.”

I see, I thought, watching them from a distance. So the TV producer did have an ulterior motive for coming here. The world of showbiz is a tough place.

“Hey, Masamune guys. Can you teach me how to pantomime?” came Akihito’s happy-go-lucky voice from our side of the room. It was comforting to hear the other end of the spectrum. Akihito was good at providing that kind of relief.

“Sure. Let’s start off simple, with a wall.” One of the members, Masataka, raised his hands and pretended he was placing them against an invisible wall.

“Even I can do that much,” Akihito responded, immediately doing the same. But in his case, it didn’t look like there was a wall there at all. Despite that, Kaori still said, “Akihito’s good at it too!” She was probably looking at him through her hot guy filter, making her more lenient in her evaluation.

“Then there’s making light objects seem heavy.” Muneyoshi took a balloon

out of his inside pocket and quickly inflated it. He then bounced it towards Masataka, who staggered when he caught it as if it were a bowling ball. His trembling arms and pained expression really made it look like he was holding something heavy. *He's not a world-renowned professional for nothing.*

"Take it, Akihito!" He passed the balloon to Akihito, throwing it with all his might.

"Wh-Whoa!" Akihito fell on his rear with a *thud*. Their acting had been so realistic that he reacted as though it really was a bowling ball being flung at him. That too was amazing in a way, and Kaori and I laughed.

Suddenly, the three men were interrupted by a crashing sound that came from somewhere not too far away.

"Hey, did you hear the sound of something outside breaking just now?"

"Yeah! It came from the showroom!"

The sound of something breaking in the showroom... In other words, one of the pieces of art broke? I suddenly felt a chill in the air. However, it seemed like we were the only ones who heard, since we were near the door. The other guests were still chatting away.

"Aoi, you still have the key, right? Wanna go take a look?" Akihito asked quietly. I nodded and we left the party room to go to the showroom. There were five of us in all: me, Akihito, Kaori, and the Masamune duo.

"O-Okay, I'm opening it."

"Y-Yeah."

Hopefully it was just our imagination, I prayed. But I still had a bad feeling as I nervously turned the key and slowly opened the door. I looked around the room and saw nothing out of the ordinary.

Just as I was sighing in relief, Kaori pointed and said, "A-Aoi! Over there!" Turning to look, I was shocked at what I saw. The owner's treasure—the Chinese celadon jar, of which only a few dozen of its kind existed in the world—was shattered in pieces on the table.

I gasped. It was so shocking that I couldn't even bring myself to speak. The

windows were closed. The door was locked, too. There was no one inside this room. Despite all of that, the owner's treasure—no, a world-class work of art—had suddenly been destroyed. I couldn't believe it.

"A-Aoi, did you really lock this door when you left?" Akihito asked me, his face pale.

I felt my panic growing. "I-I did. I locked it properly, I swear." I even double-checked since the responsibility was so great. I was confident in that.

"B-But how could it break by itself?" Kaori asked, wide-eyed in disbelief. "And it was only the Chinese celadon—the most expensive piece here."

"Right, it's like this one thing was shot with a gun..." said one of the Masamune members.

"Yeah," replied the other.

"Could it have been intentional?" came the voice of the producer, Shimizu, who I hadn't noticed was standing behind us.

Surprised, I turned around and stared at him. "You don't mean...someone broke it on purpose?"

"No way!"

As we were murmuring amongst ourselves, Yoshie appeared. "What's the matter, Aoi?"

"Y-Yoshie...it..." I pointed at the shattered celadon jar.

Yoshie gasped. Her eyes wide open, she covered her mouth. "Wh-Who broke it? This is a terrible disaster!" She looked around, her face pale.

"N-No one was here. We were in the party room when we heard the sound of something breaking. The door was locked."

"Wh-What about the windows, then? Everyone, check the window locks!" she shouted hysterically, trembling.

"O-Okay."

We split up and checked the windows. The Masamune duo gave their report:

"All of the windows are locked properly and fully intact."

“Besides, even though this is the first floor, it’s really high off the ground. It’d be impossible to sneak in without a ladder.”

Yoshie put her hand to her forehead. “Wh-What do we do?!”

“I-I’m going to get the owner.” I turned to leave the room, but Yoshie panicked and grabbed my hand. “N-No, Aoi! This is seriously a disaster!”

Then, Shimizu chuckled. “Wasn’t this the goal all along?”

“Huh?”

“Seiji always brags about this jar when he has guests over. Someone here probably hates him and plotted to destroy his most precious treasure. It’s not a locked room murder mystery, but you could call it a locked room antique destruction mystery.” Shimizu had a twisted, almost mocking grin on his face.

A locked room antique destruction mystery... We stood frozen in place in front of the completely destroyed celadon jar.

9

Someone who hates the owner destroyed his most valued treasure, the Chinese celadon antique? I couldn’t believe it. I couldn’t, but it really did happen. In this locked room, the jar was suddenly—and audibly—broken. *Who could’ve done this, and how?* Thinking about those two questions was throwing me for a loop.

First, let’s think about “who.” Someone who would hate the owner. Shimizu, the producer, had just been the target of some harsh words from him. Yanagihara, a fellow appraiser, could possibly secretly dislike him. The ikebana teacher Hanamura and the Masamune duo...probably didn’t have anything against him. As for Akihito... I glanced at him. His face was pale, and he was shaking.

“What’s wrong, Akihito?”

“A-Aoi, this is bad. It might’ve been me,” he whispered.

“Wh-What? How did you manage that?”

“The sound came right after I fell down, right? What if the impact carried over...?” he whimpered, teary-eyed.

I had no words. Kaori and I exchanged glances. *I guess it's not so funny when his cluelessness goes this far.*

“A fall like that isn't going to break a jar,” I said, mildly exasperated.

“R-Really?” Akihito's face brightened as if his life had been saved. *Yeah, it definitely wasn't him.* Besides, Akihito admired the owner. He wouldn't hate him. As for who *would*, the owner's cousins were a possibility too. They were once his rivals.

As I frowned, puzzled, I noticed Yoshie in the corner of my eye. She looked pained. Suddenly, her words flashed through my mind: “Seiji's passion for antiques is abnormal. There was a time when he was so obsessed with one that it made me want to break it.” *What if...?* Even if she didn't hate the owner himself, she could hate the antiques that he puts above everything and everyone. That made her a suspect too. *But if Yoshie's suspicious, then the manager is too.* He was dealing with all sorts of emotions, and it was possible that he hated the owner's treasure. Come to think of it, he was acting strangely too.

But there's no way it could be Yoshie or the manager. I can't imagine either of them breaking a world-class antique, no matter how displeased they feel. But if it was one of them, it wouldn't be strange for them to have a duplicate key... Argh! I can't get my thoughts straight, and I hate myself for suspecting people I know!

Then, Holmes's voice echoed through the showroom: “What's the matter?”

“Holmes!” I was so relieved to see him. Behind him was the owner, who'd already changed into a kimono. We all stiffened.

“What's wrong? You look like you've seen a ghost,” the owner asked.

As the two of them were about to enter the showroom, Yoshie cried out and clung to the owner. “I'm sorry, Seiji! I broke that celadon jar! It's all my fault!” she wailed.

“Huh?” We all gaped. *W-Was it really her?*

“I always hated it because you loved it so much! It made me want to break it. That’s why this happened. I’m so sorry!”

“What’re you talking about...?” the owner frowned. He looked inside the room dubiously. His eyes opened wide when they landed on the broken celadon jar on the table.

We all rushed to explain what happened:

“I’m so sorry!”

“N-No, it wasn’t her fault. We were in the party room, and...”

“It was me! I fell down!”

The owner snorted. “That’s not celadon,” he said resolutely.

Everyone froze. “What?”

“The shape, color, and luster of the broken fragments are totally different. It’s a fake.”

“H-Huh?”

“What’s the meaning of this?”

We were dumbfounded.

“Heck if I know what it means! Ask Kiyotaka!” the owner huffed, looking at Holmes.

“It must be nice to make someone else do all the work.” Holmes shrugged, exasperated. He walked over to the table, his footsteps echoing through the silent showroom. Tension ran through the air, and we all gulped in anticipation.

“Judging from your explanations just now, I believe that this case is not a matter of ‘someone sneaked into a locked room,’ but rather, ‘the real article and the broken fake were already switched when this room was open.’”

The rest of us frowned and exchanged glances.

“Th-That can’t be true. How could they switch them while we were here?”

“R-Right?”

“They probably distracted everyone when they performed the swap. The real

celadon is most likely right here,” Holmes said, gently lifting up the white tablecloth.

Under the table was the celadon jar, in perfect condition.

“Th-The celadon! It’s not broken!”

“My assumption is that they drew the guests’ attention to either the chandelier on the ceiling or the paintings on the opposite side of the room. They would’ve switched the pieces during that time, and then immediately left the room and mimicked my father’s voice to call everyone to the party hall. And as they were leaving, they would’ve blocked the broken jar from view with their own body. Also, the sound of the vase breaking would’ve been an audio recording. They gauged the right timing to play it.”

We were baffled by his explanation. It did seem possible, but who could do all of that...?

“This was the work of a master of misdirection. The only suspects that come to my mind are the world-renowned performers, Masamune.” Holmes grinned.

“Huh?” We all turned to the duo in shock. They were looking back at Holmes with blank expressions on their faces.

Come to think of it...back then, Masataka got everyone to look at the ceiling by talking about the chandelier. Muneyoshi could’ve performed the swap during that time, then left and imitated the manager’s voice to get us to go to the party room. He could’ve quickly come back and acted as though he’d never left. The two of them would’ve blocked our view as we exited so that we wouldn’t see the broken pot. I don’t remember clearly, but I think they were at the back of the group.

The Masamune duo didn’t argue back against Holmes’s logic or make excuses. Shimizu looked at them, dumbfounded. He leaned towards them and asked, “Huh, it was really you guys? Why would you play such a mean prank?”

The duo’s faces twisted into grins.

“Could they perhaps be connected to the magician, Don Kageyama?” Holmes asked.

Shimizu shook his head. “No. They’re not in the same agency, and I’ve never heard of him teaching them.”

The Masamune duo smiled cynically. “We...were saved by Kageyama.” *Saved?*

“Yeah. We grew up in an orphanage and had no relatives. Kageyama regularly visited as a volunteer and put on magic shows for us.”

“He taught us magic too...and we aspired to be like him one day. He’s the one who gave us hopes and dreams.”

Everyone looked surprised at their words, but Holmes maintained his calm expression. I couldn’t tell what he was thinking.

“So you wanted to strike back at the man who declared your savior’s treasure a fake?” Shimizu asked, leaning in even closer.

Holmes nodded. “That’s likely the case. Though it wasn’t broadcast, it still brought Kageyama shame. I heard that he was quite shaken.”

The Masamune duo smiled wryly at Holmes.

“We were in the audience during the filming. I’ll never forget Kageyama’s shocked face. More than anything, I wanted to know if Seiji Yagashira really could tell the difference between real and fake.”

“Yeah, I’ve always wondered how good his perception was. We were going to make him see his prized treasure broken, and if he got upset we were going to laugh at him and go, ‘That’s a fake!’ It didn’t work out, though.”

The Masamune duo clicked their tongues in annoyance.

“I’m sorry, but your attempt was simply pathetic. To us, those fragments were so blatantly different that it was as if you’d replaced a white jar with a black one.” Clearly exasperated, Holmes had a cold look in his eyes.

“What the hell?” Masataka leaned in, as though ready to start a fight. Everyone froze at the tense situation.

It was rare for Holmes to speak that way. He looked calm, but he must’ve been angry at them for causing a ruckus on the owner’s special day.

“Stop it, Masataka.” Muneyoshi immediately put his arm in front of Masataka,

blocking his way. “You said your name was Kiyotaka Yagashira, right? If you think your eyes are so good, want to have a match with me?” Muneyoshi took a deck of playing cards from his inner pocket and plopped them down onto the center table.

“Cards?”

“Yeah, we’ll play poker. How about it?” he challenged.

“Fine.” Holmes sat down at the table.

“If you lose, you’ll have to grovel on the floor and apologize for shaming our savior.”

All the owner did was appraise a fake for what it was. Why would Holmes have to apologize? I was bewildered. It made no sense.

Nevertheless, Holmes smiled and nodded. “All right.”

Everyone started to murmur amongst themselves.

“Hmph, you act like it’ll be easy, but Muneyoshi’s card skills are world-class,” Masataka said, placing his hand on Muneyoshi’s shoulder.

Muneyoshi nodded and began by fanning the cards out face-up. He then quickly brought them together and shuffled them. His technique was amazing, as you’d expect from someone who performs across the globe.

The cards were dealt, five each. Muneyoshi looked at his and made a confident face. I felt the anxiety return.

Holmes slumped his shoulders without even touching his cards. “Ah, that’s unfortunate. It’s my loss.” He threw up his hands.

Everyone was startled because his cards were still face-down.

“Holmes, say that after looking. Besides, you’re allowed to discard and draw new cards in poker,” said Akihito.

“He’s right. You don’t have to grovel in front of someone like him!” I insisted.

Holmes smiled weakly. “Muneyoshi’s hand is a full house of two aces and three kings. Unfortunately, my hand is nothing. Even if I try, the best I can do is a pair or two. Winning is impossible.” He sounded disappointed, but he was still

smiling.

Muneyoshi's eyes widened. "H-How do you know that?"

"When you fanned out the cards at first, they were in a specific order, right? With your excellent training, you made it look like you were shuffling the cards, but I could tell that they were being returned to their original positions. You left the ace of spades on top and began dealing from the second card. And perhaps just in case, when Masataka put his hand on your shoulder, he slipped a card into his sleeve from your collar. It was so seamless that I thought I'd gotten to see a free show. I surely can't win like this...but it's not exactly a fair match, is it?" Holmes explained, still smiling.

The showroom fell silent. Everyone was speechless.

Holmes stood up without making a sound, and Masataka squeaked, "Wh-Who *are* you?"

"I'm just an appraiser-in-training. However, could you do me a favor and remember something?"

"Wh-What is it?" The Masamune duo gulped, as did the rest of us.

Holmes's smile instantly changed to a sharp glare. "You'd best not make light of keen eyes."

The Masamune duo gasped and froze in place, overwhelmed by the impact of that statement. The room fell silent again.

"That's enough, Kiyotaka." The owner put his hand on Holmes's shoulder and looked at the Masamune duo. "I apologize for shaming Kageyama in a public setting," he said, bowing deeply. The Masamune duo looked shocked. The owner continued, "I'm truly sorry for hurting Kageyama with my words. The antique he brought in was a rather elaborate counterfeit. Depending on the viewer, it may have seemed quite valuable. But, a fake's a fake. No matter how good it is, you can't call it real. The moment an appraiser does that, it gets recognized as genuine, and everything becomes warped.

"An appraiser's mistake can distort history. It's a very, very big responsibility we carry. I feel bad, but no matter how much money you have or how much you beg, I can't say a fake is genuine in any situation. That's my philosophy as

someone with that perceptive ability,” he declared.

I felt inspired by his words, and I’m sure everyone else did, too. *The philosophy of perception...*

“We’re sorry,” the Masamune duo said remorsefully after a short time had passed.

“To be honest, we thought that maybe you didn’t like Kageyama and made something up.”

“And even if it was a fake, we didn’t get why you wouldn’t play along and say it was real. It was selfish of us... We should’ve known better. Kiyotaka was right. We made light of appraisers.”

The two looked down gloomily.

Holmes smiled gently. “I’m glad you understand now.”

“All right, that’s enough of that. There’s still tons of food and drink left. Time for another toast!” the owner exclaimed. Everyone laughed.

Then, the manager appeared. “Some new guests have arrived, and they’re looking for the man of the hour. Did something happen in here?” He looked puzzled. “Oh no, the celadon jar is broken!” he exclaimed. His face went pale.

“That’s a fake. Masamune was putting on a show,” the owner replied.

“A-A show?”

“Yep, a show. Anyway, people are still coming, huh? That’s great. Back to the party we go, everyone!” Looking cheerful, the owner headed for the party room, and everyone followed him, smiling.

“Okay, I really *am* scared of Holmes,” Kaori said, hugging herself as she walked beside me.

“Yeah, I got a chill down my spine too,” Akihito added, nodding.

I looked down, not saying anything. Holmes *had* been intimidating. *I can understand why they’d say those things, but I...*

“Aoi, do you have the key to this room?” Holmes walked up to us, startling

Kaori and Akihito.

“Oh, yes. Sorry, I’ve been holding onto it all this time.” I hurriedly held out the key.

Holmes shook his head. “No, thank you for taking care of it.”

After checking that everyone had left the room, we locked the doors with a *clack*.

“I apologize for that unseemly display earlier. I lost my temper,” Holmes said to me quietly as we headed to the party room.

“No, you don’t have to be sorry.” I looked up at him, and my heart lurched at his pained expression.

“Did you also think I was scary, Aoi?” He seemed concerned.

“Huh?”

“I’ve done similar things in front of people in the past, which often made them look terrified.” His self-deprecating smile made my chest tighten. Holmes must’ve hurt many people in the past with his sharp observations.

“No... I wasn’t scared. I could tell that you were truly proud of the owner. It was admirable how you tried to protect someone you loved. You were really cool.”

Holmes’s eyes widened. The next instant, he had a carefree, almost childlike smile on his face. “Thanks, Aoi.”

I looked down. For some reason, it was hard to maintain eye contact. *What’s going on? Something about him is just unfair today.*

“Kiyotakaaa! Hurry up!” The owner’s angry voice resounded, breaking the silence.

Holmes shrugged, exasperated. “There’s really no winning against him.”

“He’s amazing, though. I was touched by his speech just now.”

“Yes, he is a respectable teacher. I’ll be inheriting everything from him, and one day, if I can surpass him...” Holmes murmured to himself before saying, “Anyway, shall we go?” He smiled and started walking.

“Yes!” I nodded and followed him.

The owner was standing in the center of the hall, surrounded by all the guests. The nationally certified appraiser, Seiji Yagashira, really was an amazing person, and Holmes would be following in his footsteps—inheriting his philosophy of perception and everything that came with it...

Chapter 2: *Las Meninas*

1

It was now autumn in the city of Kyoto, meaning comfortable temperatures, clear blue skies, and gradually reddening maple trees. It was also the harvest season, so foods using the abundant local crops and Japanese sweets made with chestnuts were trending. You might say that autumn is Kyoto's most attractive season of the year, and clearly tourists thought so. The shops on Teramachi Street and Sanjo Street were getting busier.

I looked out the window as I leisurely cleaned the store. Lately I've been able to sense whether passersby are tourists or not, and there were definitely a lot of them at this time of year. These tourists would walk right past our shop, not even bothering to look at it.

Yep, as always, this shop is so quiet that you wouldn't believe how bustling it is outside. The grandfather clock continued to tick as if matching the rhythm of the relaxing jazz music playing in the background. Holmes was sitting at the counter with the account book open in front of him. As usual, he was checking it, pen in hand.

Now that I think about it, what is he always checking so intently? I stealthily peeked sideways at him without stopping my dusting. Then, I realized that he was only pretending to check the accounting. He was actually doing schoolwork.

"Holmes, you're doing schoolwork?" I exclaimed, surprised.

He looked at me sheepishly and said, "You noticed? Sorry, I have an assignment due."

"O-Oh." *You don't have to apologize,* I mentally added.

"Now that the cat's out of the bag, I'll confess that I sometimes work on my studies while pretending to be doing the accounting."

“Really?!” *No wonder he always has the account book open.*

“You’re free to work on your own homework too, if you want.” He looked embarrassed, and I couldn’t help but giggle. *I don’t think he has to feel bad about it. There’s nothing strange about watching your grandfather’s store and doing schoolwork on the side.*

“No, I’m a hired employee. I couldn’t possibly accept money for not working. I might do a little bit of studying if I have to come in before exams, though.” Usually I’d ask for time off when I had tests, but there were occasionally times when they really wanted me to come in. *If I’m allowed to study at the shop when that happens, then that’s okay with me.*

“In that case, I’ll check your homework for you.”

“Really? That’d be great!” I leaned forward, moved by his kindness. *Getting tutored by Holmes? I couldn’t be happier!*

Suddenly the door chime rang.

“W-Welcome!” I flipped around in surprise. Standing at the door was a thin, lanky man. He had an androgynous look, with long hair tied back in a ponytail. He looked to be in his late twenties.

“Hello, Kiyotaka,” he said, smiling weakly.

“Ah, Yoneyama.”

“Long time no see. Sorry for showing up in the middle of work.” He shrugged.

“It’s not a problem. As you can see, I’ve just been doing miscellaneous tasks. Please have a seat. Aoi, you can take a break too. I’ll make coffee,” Holmes said, standing up.

He says “miscellaneous tasks,” but he was doing his own homework. I sat down on the sofa in front of the counter.

“Hello there, nice to meet you. Are you Kiyotaka’s girlfriend?” Yoneyama asked me with a feeble smile.

I hurriedly shook my head. “N-No, I’m just a part-timer.”

“Oh, I see. It looked like you two had something nice going on.”

Something nice? My heart skipped a beat.

“My name is Ryosuke Yoneyama. I currently work at an art gallery.” He handed me his business card even though I’m only a high school student.

“I’m Aoi Mashiro.” I accepted the card with both hands and was immediately captivated by its artistry. “This is a wonderfully designed card.”

“Thank you.” He blushed and stooped over, scratching his head. Judging from how pleased he seemed, he must’ve designed it himself. It also seemed like he was hoping for praise when he offered it to me. *He’s kind of cute.*

As I was staring at the card, Holmes came out from the kitchenette carrying a tray. “Here you go,” he said, placing the cups in front of us. The rich fragrance enveloping us soothed my heart.

“Thank you,” Yoneyama said, bringing the cup to his mouth and smiling appreciatively. “Your coffee’s truly the best, Kiyotaka. Oh right, I brought sweets for you. They’ll go with the coffee, so let’s all eat them together.” He excitedly took a box out of a paper bag and placed it on the counter. The box had some complicated characters on it.

I squinted at the text. “How do you pronounce this?”

“This is pronounced ‘Ajari mochi.’ They’re fairly famous sweets in Kyoto, produced by a well-known store called Mangetsu, or ‘full moon.’ Thank you for bringing them, Yoneyama.” Holmes handed me one of the individually wrapped packages.

“Thank you.” I opened the package, and inside was a round roasted rice cake. I took a bite. It was springy on the outside, and the filling was very rich. “Th-This is really good.” It was so good that I broke out into a grin. Holmes and Yoneyama nodded, looking pleased with my reaction.

“It is, right? It’s a popular dessert in Kansai, but since it only has a shelf life of five days, it’s not well known in the rest of the country,” Holmes explained.

“Oh, I see.” If you have to eat them within five days, then not many people would be able to bring them home as souvenirs. It’s such a shame that there aren’t more people who know about this delicious treat! I took another bite of the Ajari mochi, savoring it and grinning again.

“I heard that Mr. Yagashira recently discovered a counterfeit at a museum. Apparently it was a really elaborate one,” Yoneyama mumbled, as if talking to himself.

“Yes. I’ll be joining him on his next museum visit. To be honest, we were talking about how we never would’ve expected a greater counterfeiter than you to appear after only a few years.”

Wait, what? A counterfeiter? I looked at Yoneyama in disbelief, and he smiled weakly.

“Ah, you must be surprised. I’m actually a former counterfeiter. I washed my hands of the business after Seiji Yagashira exposed me.”

“I-I see.” I didn’t know what else to say, so I gave him a vague smile.

“You wouldn’t have expected it, right?” Holmes asked.

I nodded and replied honestly, “Right. I imagine someone more brazen.” It was hard to believe that this feeble man was a counterfeiter.

“Nah, I think you’d be surprised how many are like me. I used to be an art student. I was confident in my skill, but I never won any contests. One day, I was looking at a famous artist’s work, and I figured, ‘I can draw something like this too!’ So I copied it, and it really was a masterpiece.”

“You can’t call a counterfeit a masterpiece,” Holmes said coldly.

Yoneyama shrank away. “Sorry, sorry. Anyway, a bad friend of mine noticed my imitation and told me I was a genius. I wasn’t used to being flattered, so I was really happy and got addicted to making copies.”

That’s so irresponsible... I couldn’t bring myself to say anything.

Holmes looked sideways at him and sighed. “Despite how he looks, he’s a sly man.”

“Sly?”

“Yes, in the way he created counterfeits. He bought paintings by obscure artists from the seventeenth century and scraped all of the paint off. Then he dissolved the paint and used it to create a new picture on the same drawing board. That way, he could produce colors that could only exist from that time

period, and even the rust on the nails in the frame would be authentic.”

“W-Wow.” That *was* amazing.

“He was also the possessed type, or rather, he made copies when he was in a unique trancelike state. So, his counterfeits didn’t have the unpleasant aura of wanting to deceive others,” Holmes said nonchalantly.

Yoneyama gave a self-derisive smile. “But you know, as I kept going, I started wanting people to look at me.”

“You wanted to be seen...?”

“Yeah. I wanted to say, ‘This wasn’t painted by a famous artist. It was me!’ That’s how I got found out. You see, Mr. Yagashira went out of his way to visit me. He said, ‘I don’t want to say this to a counterfeiter, but you’ve got skill. You deserve better than to be in the shadows, so atone for your crimes and start over. I’ll help you out if you do.’ That was the first time anyone had seen me that way, and I was so happy that I broke down weeping.” He rested his chin in his hands. He must’ve been recalling that memory, because his eyes glistened with tears.

“Come to think of it, did you have business with me today?” Holmes asked gently.

Yoneyama looked up, coming back to his senses. “Ah, yeah... Actually, I have a favor to ask you.” He fidgeted and drew away.

“What is it?”

“How do I put this? I want to ask for an appraisal.”

“Sure, of course.” Holmes immediately put his hand in his inner pocket to take out his gloves, but Yoneyama hurriedly held up his hands and said, “No, it’s not here right now.”

“Is it something large?”

“Yeah, well, kind of. Actually, the other day, I had Mr. Yagashira look at it, and he told me to show it to you...”

“My grandfather said that?” Holmes frowned. Even he seemed baffled. It certainly was strange. Why would the owner call on Holmes even though he’d

already looked at it first?

“What exactly is this item?” Holmes asked.

“It’s...a painting that I drew.”

“Huh?” Holmes and I both froze.

“You want me to appraise your painting?”

In other words, he wanted Holmes to judge how much his work was worth? Holmes may have an exceptional discerning eye, but assessing a modern painting didn’t seem like it was in his jurisdiction.

“My life kind of depends on this,” Yoneyama said, shrugging again.

“Could you tell me more?” Holmes gave him a serious look.

What did he mean by his life depending on it? I nervously waited for him to start telling his story.

Yoneyama spoke slowly, “The other day, I was at an industry party, and...”

2

His story was as follows:

After Yoneyama was exposed as a counterfeiter by the owner, he turned himself in, atoned for his crimes, and started a new life. He completely washed his hands of that world.

Thanks to the owner’s help, he’s been working an honest job ever since. However, at the same time, the owner has been making sure to inform others that Yoneyama is a former counterfeiter. He believes that Yoneyama will be able to live more confidently if he doesn’t try to hide it. *Sounds like the owner, all right.*

On one occasion, Yoneyama was invited to a party where he ended up running into the one person he wanted to avoid the most: a rich, elderly man named Takamiya who lives in the Okazaki district.

“I sold him one of my counterfeits when I was in my early twenties.”

Yoneyama shrank away again, looking ashamed.

A bad friend of his had heard a rumor that there was a rich man in Okazaki named Takamiya who had no eye for art. He then told Yoneyama to create a certain painting. Up until then, Yoneyama had only done the creation of the counterfeits. He hadn't been involved with sales. But that one time, he really wanted to see the customer's reaction with his own eyes. That's how confident he was in his work.

It was the first and last time he sold his own counterfeit. In other words, he'd run into his one and only victim at that party.

At this point in the story, Holmes crossed his arms and asked, "Whose painting did you copy?"

"Vermeer."

"A beloved artist for counterfeiters, I see." Holmes chuckled.

"What do you mean by that?" I tilted my head in confusion.

"Vermeer was a Dutch painter who was called the 'Magician of Light.' His masterful use of rays of light and his textured painting style continue to fascinate the world to this day. His most famous work is *Girl with a Pearl Earring*, which depicts a girl looking back and smiling. It's revered as the 'Dutch Mona Lisa.' An ingenious counterfeiter from the twentieth century named Meegeren was able to reproduce Vermeer's works almost perfectly, and these remain a problem for art collections all over the world. It's at the point where when you hear Vermeer's name, you also think of Meegeren," Holmes answered with ease. *It's good to see that his explanations are still going strong.*

"That's Kiyotaka for you," Yoneyama said, laughing weakly.

"Everyone in this industry knows of him. By the way, I know Mr. Takamiya as well. He may be old, but he still has an eye for great art. I find it a bit difficult to believe that you'd be able to trick him into buying a counterfeit Vermeer. Was the work you copied *The Concert*, by any chance?"

"No, it was *The Guitar Player*," Yoneyama said quietly.

Holmes's eyes lit up. "I see. How sly."

It was like the two of them were communicating with their eyes, and I was the only one who was out of the loop. Holmes noticed my blank stare and turned to me with a gentle smile. "My apologies. *The Guitar Player* is," he said, taking an art book from the shelf and flipping it open, "this work here."

On the page was a painting of a young girl wearing a simple dress. She was holding a guitar that was a little bigger than a ukulele and smiling at someone outside of the frame. The painting had a soft and subdued atmosphere.

"This was one of Vermeer's final works. Due to the deterioration of his ability, it's worth less than his other paintings."

"Oh, so does that mean it's easier to forge?"

I nodded in understanding, but Yoneyama shook his head with a feeble smile and said, "No, that's not it."

"Huh?"

"This painting was kept in an art gallery in England called Kenwood House, but it was the subject of a theft in 1974," Holmes said with a long face.

I leaned forward, surprised. "Huh? This painting was stolen?"

"Yes. However, it was found two months later and remains on display at Kenwood House today."

"Oh, so they got it back. That's good."

"Indeed, but it wouldn't be strange for someone to think, 'What if they created a fake in order to maintain their pride, and the real painting is still out there somewhere?'" Holmes looked straight at me. His sharp gaze made me gulp.

A work that was stolen but came back to the gallery. In other words, Yoneyama and his friend had claimed that the one at Kenwood House was a cover-up, and theirs was the real thing.

"What about the other one you mentioned, *The Concert*?" I asked.

"That one was another victim of theft. Unfortunately, its whereabouts are still

unknown.” Holmes looked down, looking sincerely sorrowful.

I see... But that means that works of art really do get stolen, huh? It's like something out of a manga or film.

“*The Concert* is too risky to forge, you know?” Yoneyama said.

“Indeed. You really are a sly one.”

“Hey now, it's all in the past. Besides, it was my friend's idea.”

“Yes, I am aware.”

The two looked at each other and smiled.

“Umm, why is *The Concert* riskier?” I felt bad being the only one who didn't understand, but I still had to ask.

“If a famous missing painting appeared, it would be world news. Even if you made the buyer promise not to publicly announce it, there's a chance that the real painting would appear in the future. So, it's less risky to choose a work that has already been recovered. That way, the buyer will also be willing to keep it to themselves and not proclaim that theirs is the real article. It's unlikely that the public will find out.”

“I-I see.” It made sense. It'd be a huge deal if a centuries-old masterpiece that'd been missing all this time suddenly appeared. But if it were *The Guitar Player*, which had already been recovered, then they wouldn't have to worry about that.

“Sly, right?” Holmes looked at me as if seeking my agreement. I was going to nod, but I hesitated. It was hard to say “Yes, that *is* sly!” right in front of the perpetrator.

“You're always so quick-witted when it comes to counterfeits, Kiyotaka.” Yoneyama smiled as if he was enjoying this.

Holmes straightened his posture. “So, how much did you try to make Mr. Takamiya pay for it?”

Yoneyama held up one finger. *Huh? Does that mean one million yen? He sold it for that much?*

“One hundred million,” he said without hesitation.

“O-One hundred million?” I squealed, my voice echoing through the store.

“Considering that Vermeer’s early works were auctioned for one billion, one hundred million is a safe price for a later work that you can’t publicly declare to be real.”

“S-Safe? That’s a safe price?”

“Assuming it *is* real. A counterfeit isn’t even worth a single yen,” Holmes snapped, as if to remind us of that fact.

“Sharp as ever,” Yoneyama said with a quiet laugh, shrugging his shoulders.

“I’m surprised that Mr. Takamiya would offer one hundred million, though. I know he’s wealthy, but he’s also cautious and shrewd. Was your friend’s sales pitch that impressive?” Holmes seemed perplexed. He rested his chin on his hand and stared at Yoneyama.

“There was no pitch. We just showed him the painting and stated the price.”

“I see.”

“A while after that, he said he’d buy it. The check came at a later date, but it was only for one million. It didn’t seem like he was going to pay the rest, but we couldn’t pursue it further, so it ended up only being sold for that amount.” Yoneyama shrugged.

Holmes smiled in acknowledgment and nodded. “That makes sense. Mr. Takamiya may have seen through you, but he still paid you one million. He was rewarding you for deceiving him and implying that he saw promise in your skill.”

Yoneyama took a deep breath. “Exactly. So when I ran into him again at the party, I couldn’t say anything. I just stood there with my head down, shaking. But he gave me this nice, unthreatening smile and said, ‘Thank you for *The Guitar Player* from some time back.’ I felt like I’d been drenched in cold water.” Remembering it must’ve really given him the chills, because his face was pale as he held his head in his hands.

“I understand. This industry is full of monsters like my grandfather. It’s a terrifying place,” Holmes said, nodding. My face stiffened. *You’re a monster too,*

Holmes.

“Then, Mr. Takamiya said to me...” Yoneyama took a deep breath and resumed his story.

After receiving Yoneyama’s *The Guitar Player*, Mr. Takamiya immediately went to England to see the painting that was at Kenwood House. At that point, he knew without a doubt that the painting he’d received was a counterfeit. The deciding factor was that it looked truly identical. There wasn’t the slightest difference between it and the one on display in the gallery. To Mr. Takamiya, it felt as though Yoneyama had engraved every detail of the work into his head—as though Vermeer himself was possessing him as he copied it. As Holmes said, the one million yen was indeed both a reward for fooling him and a show of respect for the depth of the forgery.

Judging from his confidence and the way Holmes spoke of him, Takamiya must also have quite the discerning eye.

Yoneyama sighed deeply, as if recalling how he felt back then. “I was relieved, but then Mr. Takamiya said, ‘However, that doesn’t change the fact that you committed a crime against me. Now that we’ve met again, I’d like you to compensate me.’”

“Did he want his money back?” I asked.

Yoneyama shook his head. “If only. That would’ve been easy to take care of. Instead, he said...”

Mr. Takamiya’s request was: “I want you to grant one of my wishes. If you do, then I’ll forgive you.”

Holmes and I exchanged glances. *Grant one of his wishes? What does that mean?* As those questions flitted through my mind, Holmes nodded as if he understood.

“He wanted you to paint him something, yes?”

“Yes, and there was a condition.”

“What? Surely he didn’t request a forgery, right?”

“No. But he wanted me to paint him something similar to Diego Velázquez.”

“Diego Velázquez, you say?” Holmes folded his hands on top of the counter, seeming intrigued. I didn’t recognize the name, so I just stared at them blankly.

Holmes flipped the book that was still on the counter to another page and explained, “Diego Velázquez was a Spanish court painter—a master of the seventeenth century, which is considered the golden age of Spanish paintings. His famous works include *The Surrender of Breda* and *Las Meninas*.”

The page he flipped to had a picture of *The Surrender of Breda*. It depicted a post-war setting: soldiers gathered with their horses and spears; two men showing respect for each other. It was a brilliant painting—I could understand why the artist was called a master.

“*The Surrender of Breda* is a victory painting.”

A victory painting... In other words, it shows Spain winning the war.

“Normally, victory paintings depict the losing side’s commander kneeling on the ground while the victor looks down on him from atop his horse. However, *The Surrender of Breda* has the victorious commander standing on the ground with the loser, placing his hand on the loser’s shoulder as if showing appreciation for his hard work.”

I looked at the painting again. The two men looked like they belonged to the same troops, but it was actually the winner placing his hand on the loser’s shoulder. They almost seemed like comrades in arms.

“This excellent work shows Spain’s chivalrous spirit when they won the war. Diego Velázquez was amazing for both his technical skill *and* his ability to tug at one’s heartstrings,” Holmes said, smiling.

Paintings that tug at your heartstrings... After hearing the rest of his explanation, I looked at *The Surrender of Breda* again. It seemed noble, how the two men were supportive of each other regardless of the war’s outcome. I realized again how much better it is to have background knowledge when encountering such works of art. Just looking at them isn’t enough to understand the emotions and drama contained within.

“So, did you complete that painting?” Holmes asked. His voice brought me

back to my senses.

“Yeah, I did. Mr. Yagashira said he’d come with me for the handover, because it’d be better to have a third-party witness who knows the situation.”

That does sound like a good idea. The owner must’ve been sincerely concerned about Yoneyama to offer to go with him.

“But when he saw my painting, he said, ‘I’m not going anymore. Get Kiyotaka to be your witness,’” Yoneyama said with a bitter expression.

“And that’s why you’re here.”

“I think he said that because there’s something only you would know. Could you please come with me?” Yoneyama bowed deeply.

Holmes sighed. “I understand. Since my grandfather called on me, I can’t refuse. Honestly, I also want to see what you painted.”

“Thank god.” Yoneyama wearily put his hand on his chest. He then looked at me and said, “Oh right, do you want to come too, Aoi?”

I was a bit surprised. “Huh? Is that okay?”

“Yeah. Mr. Takamiya lost his wife, son, and beloved granddaughter in an accident. He only has one living relative left. I think his granddaughter would be around your age if she were still alive, so he might feel comforted by your presence.”

Holmes nodded. “That may be true. Would you like to come with us, Aoi?”

“Y-Yes! I’d love to.” I was curious about Takamiya’s mysterious request, and I wanted to see Yoneyama’s painting. I also wanted to know why the owner called on Holmes. He hadn’t criticized the painting, so that wasn’t the issue. Perhaps it was indiscreet of me, but I nodded eagerly, anxious to find out.

3

That Saturday, Holmes and I headed to the Okazaki district where Mr. Takamiya lived. Sitting in the passenger seat of the car, I looked out at Heian Shrine’s large red torii gates, Okazaki Park, and the local zoo. It was quite a

spacious area.

“The vermilion of Heian Shrine looks great against the blue sky, doesn’t it?” Holmes said while driving, seeming fascinated.

“It really does. This looks like a good place for a walk.”

“Yes, there’s the shrine as well as the art museum’s large garden. You can also enjoy reading in the library, and Nanzen-ji Temple is within walking distance too. You can easily spend an entire day in Okazaki.”

“I see. Kyoto really is full of sights, huh?”

“Indeed. Let’s come here again when we can take our time to explore,” Holmes said smoothly, making my heart skip a beat.

“Y-Yeah. It’d be great to have you as a guide.” *Wouldn’t going to a museum, library, and zoo with Holmes be like an actual date? Then again, we also went to the Hyakumanben market and Mount Kurama together, so maybe he doesn’t consider it anything special.* Frustrated that I was the only one flustered by this, I looked out the window to hide my nervousness, knowing that it might be futile.

Eventually we reached the residential area. Unlike in the rest of Kyoto, here there were large houses with plenty of space between them. It had the atmosphere of a rich neighborhood. We turned onto a small lane and suddenly a tall fence came into view.

“This is the Takamiya estate,” Holmes said, looking at the fence.

“Huh?” I gaped in surprise. The high fence practically screamed “No intruders allowed.” On the other side of the large iron gate was a sprawling grassy lawn, and in the center of the lawn was a Western-style house with subdued brick walls. I’d seen my fair share of flashy Western-style estates here and there, but Takamiya’s was different. Instead of feeling new and modern, it had a historical, stately ambiance. Its regal atmosphere was like that of an old castle.

There was a large parking lot in front of the gate, and a big van was parked there. Yoneyama was in the driver’s seat. When he saw us, he smiled weakly as usual and waved. Holmes returned the gesture and then backed the car into a parking space.

“Right on time. Thanks for coming.” Yoneyama opened the trunk of his car and took out a large wrapped painting. *That must be the one he painted—the one that’s supposed to be in Diego Velázquez’s style.*

“Welcome. Please come this way,” said the attendant who came outside to fetch us. We entered the Takamiya estate and headed towards the study. On the way, I was surprised by the size of the foyer and the height of the atrium. There were dark red carpets, chandeliers, and a large portrait on the wall which was probably of Takamiya and his wife in their younger days. It depicted a young man with masculine features and a beautiful young woman. It was a wonderful painting that I’d imagine was commissioned from a famous artist.

“Here we are.” The attendant stopped in front of the study and slowly opened the door. The first thing I saw was Yoneyama’s rendition of *The Guitar Player*. I was a bit startled that Takamiya would put it on display despite knowing that it was a fake. In front of the painting was a grand desk, which the man himself was sitting at. He looked around the same age as the owner, which would put him in his late seventies. However, he didn’t have the owner’s glamorous aura. Instead, he seemed calm, gentle, and refined.

“Thank you for coming,” he said, picking up his cane and standing up. He spoke in standard Japanese rather than one of the regional dialects.

The three of us bowed.

“Hello there, Kiyotaka. Long time no see. Seiji told me you’d be coming today,” Takamiya said, smiling at Holmes.

“It’s been quite a while. I see you haven’t changed.”

“Nah, I’ve grown old. I wish I could stay energetic forever like Seiji.” Takamiya then looked at me. “Who’s this?”

“I-I’m Aoi Mashiro,” I said awkwardly.

Holmes immediately followed up, saying, “She’s one of our staff members at Kura.”

“I see. It must be interesting being surrounded by the Yagashiras. Do your best at work, all right?”

Judging from those words, he must've been very familiar with the peculiarities of the Yagashira family. I instantly felt a sense of kinship with him. "I will," I answered happily, bowing again.

Takamiya continued walking to Yoneyama. "You've already finished, I see. Are you a fast worker?" he asked, still smiling. His tone was gentle, yet there was something imposing about it.

"Y-Yes, I think I'm fast." Yoneyama trembled as he nodded. He then saw the easel that had been set up. "Um... Can I put it here?"

"Yes, please do."

"O-Okay." Yoneyama put the large wrapped painting on the easel. Watching his shaky movements made me nervous as well. "Th-There," Yoneyama said, stepping away.

Takamiya had seemed confident up until then, but I noticed him gulp in anticipation. Holmes stood by the wall with a sharp glimmer in his eyes. The study was engulfed in a tense atmosphere.

Takamiya quietly lifted his hand and removed the white cloth surrounding the painting in one swift motion.

"Oh...!" I murmured unconsciously. The painting depicted an adorable, doll-like young girl around seven or eight years old. She had luscious black hair, deep black eyes, and rosy cheeks. She wore a pink dress and had a bit of a prim and proper smile.

Takamiya stood there wordlessly. Behind him, Holmes was smiling. "It's an oil painting, as Diego Velázquez is known for. I think you've done a wonderful job of replicating the master's style. By the way, who is this girl?"

Takamiya cast his eyes down. "It's my granddaughter, Satoko."

Holmes closed his mouth and his face took on a gentle expression.

Yoneyama hesitantly looked up and said, "I heard from Mr. Yagashira that your granddaughter used to be the apple of your eye, so I asked your secretary for a picture of her." He sounded apologetic for doing that without permission. There was something bitter about the way he said "used to be"—*right*,

Takamiya lost his family in an accident. This painting must be of his late granddaughter.

“I see. Diego Velázquez painted several portraits of Princess Margarita, the beloved daughter of King Philip IV of Spain. The paintings were to be sent to Austria where she was to be married, but it’s true that the king adored her. Did you use that as a hint?” Holmes asked.

Yoneyama nodded silently.

Standing in front of the painting, Takamiya’s hands were trembling and his eyes were moist with tears. “It’s more brilliant than I’d ever imagined. Satoko must be happy in heaven, too.”

“Thank you.” Yoneyama put his hand on his chest in relief and looked ruefully at Takamiya.

Takamiya gazed at the painting and said, “You see, I gained an incredible fortune through successful business operations. For a time, I thought I’d obtained everything the world had to offer. I even boasted that there was nothing that money couldn’t buy. Then divine punishment came for me. Since I was busy with work, my wife and my son’s family went on a trip without me. There was a car accident, and just like that, I lost most of my family. My wife who I had spent decades with, my son who I was ever so proud of, and my beloved granddaughter, Satoko...”

The tyrant who bragged about obtaining everything in the world...lost everything that money could never replace. I could tell how much sorrow and pain he was in. I cast my eyes down, unable to look directly at him.

Yoneyama continued, “Yes, I heard about that too. I was told that your granddaughter was only five at the time.”

“Huh?” I looked back at the painting. *This girl is five years old?* She...didn’t look like that at all. She was quite tall for that age.

“I see,” Holmes said, nodding. “You drew her at a slightly older age.”

Yoneyama nodded emphatically. “Yes. Based on the picture I borrowed, I imagined what she would look like at elementary school age and painted that.”

At that, Takamiya couldn't hold back the tears anymore, and they streamed down his face. "Thank you so much. I never would've dreamed of being able to meet the seven-year-old Satoko." He shook Yoneyama's hand firmly.

"I hope I met your expectations."

I'm sure his work granted Takamiya's wish. I felt my chest grow hot too, and tears rose to my eyes.

"You exceeded them," Takamiya said, gripping Yoneyama's hand tighter.

Yoneyama looked a bit hesitant. *Why doesn't he seem happy?* I wondered.

"The painting itself seems to have exceeded his expectations, but it's not what he was originally looking for, right?" Holmes asked in a strong tone of voice. The rest of us stopped in our tracks. *The painting itself exceeded his expectations, but it's not what he was originally looking for?* I frowned, not knowing what Holmes was talking about.

On the other hand, Yoneyama seemed to be thinking the same thing as Holmes. He nodded with a serious look on his face. "I felt the same way. I was confident when I was painting it, but when I showed the completed portrait to Mr. Yagashira, he went silent for a while before telling me to go to Kiyotaka. I'm guessing that he also sensed something wrong with it that he couldn't explain in words. You seem to be satisfied with it, but it's completely irrelevant to your request, right?" Yoneyama spoke confidently, as if his weak nature up until now had been a facade. I was surprised that this feeble man could have such an intense look in his eyes.

Takamiya quickly looked down, as if trying to avoid that gaze. "Yes... The reason why I asked for Diego Velázquez was that there was a specific painting I was hoping for. I wanted to see what kind of painting the genius who once tricked me would come up with under that condition. Would you paint a wonderful piece that picked up on what I hoped to see, or would you bring me a piece that simply mimicked his technique alone?"

I see... Takamiya was testing Yoneyama to see if he'd meet his expectations.

"In the end, you didn't figure out what I was hoping for, but you went above and beyond it. It wouldn't be an exaggeration to say that you far exceeded the

client's imagining, so it's fine. I'm extremely satisfied," Takamiya said earnestly, staring at the painting.

"But if it's not what you originally wanted, then I can't accept this outcome," Yoneyama said loudly, sounding upset. It really was like he'd become a different person. He used to erase his presence when he was creating forgeries. He reformed himself and now works at an art gallery, but maybe this was the first time that someone requested a painting from him like this—someone who knew everything about him and recognized his talent. Something might've been budding within him—the pride of a creator who wholeheartedly wants to meet the client's expectations...

What does Holmes think? I glanced at him. He was standing by the wall and looking out the window with a pleasant smile on his face. *What's he looking at?* I followed his gaze and saw two young children playing in the yard. They were unsteady on their feet, and their young parents seemed to be having fun watching over them.

"Who's that family?" I asked quietly.

Takamiya gazed out the window with a warm expression. "They're my only remaining treasure. I lost my family, but one of my grandchildren survived, and that's his family. My grandson, his wife, and their children, ages two and three. They're my great-grandchildren. They all love me regardless of who I am, and they're truly irreplaceable to me." His face relaxed into a content smile as he watched the happy family playing outside.

Holmes nodded, as if he'd figured out everything. "I understand, Takamiya."

"Hm?" Takamiya turned to look at Holmes.

"You wanted Yoneyama to paint you something like *Las Meninas*, right?" Holmes said confidently.

Takamiya's eyes widened.

"*Las Meninas?*" Yoneyama and I asked in tandem—but with different inflections. My question was in a confused tone, while Yoneyama's had a dubious ring to it.

After a moment of silence, Takamiya squinted as if he was looking at

something dazzling. “You’re truly a wonder, Kiyotaka.”

Las Meninas. That was one of the paintings Holmes named the other day when he was talking about Diego Velázquez’s famous works. I saw a picture of it, too. “Las meninas” is Spanish for “the court ladies.” *If I recall correctly, the painting had Princess Margarita in the center, surrounded by several other court ladies. I also remember reading that it was highly praised for its complex composition. Did Takamiya want Yoneyama to paint a complex composition like that?*

As if answering my question, Holmes reached for the bag he’d left on the floor and took out the book. “I brought it just in case,” he said, flipping it open to the page with *Las Meninas* on it. Princess Margarita was in the middle, just as I’d remembered. To the left, a court lady was holding her hand. To the right were three girls. The youngest of the three was placing one foot on the back of a dog that was lying down. It looked cruel at first glance, but the dog didn’t appear to be bothered, so it seemed to just be childish mischief. What caught my eye was a person who was standing behind a large canvas.

“Who is this?” I asked.

“That’s Diego Velázquez himself.”

“Oh!” So this was a self-portrait, too. *If he included himself in the painting, does that mean he was a narcissist? Maybe that’s how artists are?* I stared fixedly at the painting, looking for the hint that had to be there. Yoneyama stood next to me.

“Yoneyama, please pay attention to the king and queen in the painting,” Holmes said.

“The king and queen?” Yoneyama squinted, looking confused. After a few moments of silence, he jolted up as if he’d realized something.

“Um, did you figure something out?”

“Y-Yeah. Look at this, Aoi.” He pointed at a picture frame on the back wall in the painting.

“Is this a painting inside a painting?” On the left was a woman in a dress, and on the right was an influential-looking man. It was probably a portrait of the

king and queen.

“That’s what I thought too, but it’s not. This isn’t a painting; it’s a mirror. It’s customary for the king to be on the left and the queen on the right in a painting, but here they’re reversed.”

“A mirror?” That meant that the king and queen were in the same room but out of frame. They were where Princess Margarita was facing. In other words, the figure of Velázquez was painting the king and queen on that canvas. *So that’s it.* Velázquez painted this for the king, from the king’s perspective. Nowadays you can just take a photo, but there was no such thing back then. The young Margarita was going to be married off to Austria before long. To the king, those peaceful, happy days were a precious treasure with a time limit on them. Velázquez captured a snapshot of those precious days in his painting, preserving the king’s view of the princess, the court ladies, and even Velázquez himself.

The moment I realized that, Yoneyama clenched his fist and said, “I-I’ve got it!” He continued in a low voice, “I figured out the secret of the composition of *Las Meninas*. This is the happy scenery that the king saw, right?”

Holmes nodded. I’d figured it out too. Basically, Takamiya wanted Yoneyama to paint him a happy scene of his grandson’s family playing together, since these days also wouldn’t last forever. Just like Diego Velázquez’s *Las Meninas*. It was because Takamiya knew how irreplaceable this everyday scene was. The moment I realized, I burst into tears and hurried to wipe my eyes.

“Here,” Holmes said, offering me a handkerchief.

“Th-Thank you.” I wiped my tears with it, feeling embarrassed.

Takamiya smiled at our conversation. “Thank you for understanding. You’re correct, but my request was a bit malicious. I wanted to see how far he’d solve the puzzle, but I underestimated him and assumed he’d have no idea. However, he did paint me a wonderful painting in the style of Velázquez. I’m truly satisfied.” After saying that, he looked at Yoneyama’s painting of Satoko again with a loving smile.

Yoneyama walked up to Takamiya and bowed. “Takamiya, could you give me another chance?”

Takamiya looked him in the eye without saying a word.

“Please let me paint one more. This time, I’ll paint you a work like *Las Meninas*,” Yoneyama urged.

“Yoneyama...” Takamiya seemed hesitant, but then smiled. “In that case, let me make it a formal request. Would you paint me the happy scene that I see from here right now?”

“Yes, gladly.” Yoneyama placed his hand on his chest and bowed again.

“I’m looking forward to your *Las Meninas*. But this time, please don’t copy Velázquez’s style. Make it your own painting.”

Yoneyama bowed deeply with an earnest face. “I’ll do my very best.”

It felt like I was watching King Philip IV and Diego Velázquez themselves. A brilliant artist was born right here, in this divine scene before me.

Chapter 3: The Lost Dragon — Akihito Kajiwara's Report

1

“Y-Yes, please give me the job!”

I, twenty-five-year-old actor Akihito Kajiwara, hung up the phone excitedly. It was a call from my manager about a new job.

“I have the perfect job for you, since you’re from Kyoto.”

It was a travel program; something like a Kyoto version of *See the World by Train*. The episodes were short, but it was going to be about the beautiful scenery of Kyoto. *My time’s finally come. I’ve only gotten bit parts up until now, but at last...*

“I can’t believe this is happening.”

No matter how you looked at it, it was a lead role on a national network. I sighed deeply and plunked myself down on the couch. A scroll hung on the wall in front of me: Hokusai’s painting of Mount Fuji. Family drama had resulted in the one I’d inherited being burned, but I found the same painting in a store and bought it. The name of the painting was...

“Uhh, what was it again?”

I opened the notes app on my smartphone and found the words “Dragon Over Mount Fuji.” *Right, that was it.* I nodded. At the same time, I recalled what that man—Kiyotaka “Holmes” Yagashira—had said:

“Akihito’s ‘Dragon Over Mount Fuji’ was painted by Hokusai three months before his death. Hokusai was almost ninety when he left this world, but his final words were ‘If only Heaven would permit me another five years, I could become a true painter.’ He lamented on his deathbed that he wanted to paint more and improve his skill. You could say that he was a true artist.

“I believe Kajiwaru wanted to say, ‘If you really want to pursue a career in entertainment, then do so with the proper amount of passion. Don’t go at it half-heartedly. And just like the Mount Fuji in the painting, become the best in Japan. Become a star, like the dragon ascending in the sky.’ I’m sure he was supporting you, even if he couldn’t say so.”

I felt myself tearing up again. Now that I think about it, ever since I learned about my father’s dying wish from Holmes, better jobs have mysteriously been coming my way. Right after that, I’d gotten the major role of Lysander in “A Midsummer Night’s Dream,” and now, I’m going to be the main actor in this program. If I impress people with the travel show, it could lead to another big job.

I can’t believe I get to promote Kyoto. Neither of my parents were born in Kyoto, and I don’t even speak Kansai dialect, but that doesn’t change the fact that I grew up here. I’m a “Kyoto man” too, technically.

Kyoto would be full of gorgeous sights as autumn progressed. However, I only just came home to Tokyo, and now I’m going to have to go back to Kyoto. Plus, the girls in Tokyo are going to be upset and say, “You’re leaving me to go to Kansai?” Still, my face relaxed into a content smile. They said they were thinking of showing Nanzen-ji Temple first, so it might be a good idea to check it out before the filming. Before that, I could pay a visit to that guy at Kura...and learn about the temple from him. Knowing him, he’d act annoyed but kindly explain nonetheless. I looked at the picture of Holmes I’d taken at the party the other day and smiled.

2

A few days later, I headed for Kyoto. I got on the bullet train at Shinagawa Station, and from there it was about two-and-a-half hours to Kyoto Station. The station has a modern design with large staircases, aerial bridges, a rooftop garden, and an observation deck. It definitely didn’t seem like an ancient city’s station. Apparently, people are still divided about it. My father, who was an author, was very angry about its design. He and his author friends said things like “I wanted them to use a retro-modern approach, like the Kyoto National

Museum” every time the topic came up. Maybe there was a lot of backlash, but if you set aside the notion that this is the ancient city of Kyoto, I think that the grand architecture of the Kyoto Station building is an amazing sight worth seeing. It’s not bad if you think of it as the gateway to a world-famous tourist destination. Taking a step outside of your hometown gives you a more objective perspective.

I got into a taxi in front of the station and headed towards Teramachi-Sanjo. I got off on Oike Street, near city hall, and walked into the Teramachi shopping arcade. My pulse sped up. *What am I so nervous for?* I looked at my watch: 3:30 p.m. *Come to think of it, it’s a weekday, so Holmes might not be there. But either way, if I wait there, he’ll show up eventually.*

Before long, the antique shop front and sign saying “Kura” came into view. As always, the door chime rang when I opened the door.

“Hey,” I said, trying to hide my nervousness.

The first thing I saw was Holmes and the owner sitting across from each other at the counter. *Huh, it’s rare to see the owner here,* I thought. Then I hesitated. The two clearly looked depressed about something. They had their elbows on the counter and were holding their heads in their hands like they were at a funeral.

“Wh-What’s wrong?” I asked awkwardly.

Holmes looked up. He was ever the good-looking guy, with his luscious black hair, pale skin, and frustratingly attractive face. “Akihito? I thought you returned to Tokyo.”

“Yeah, but I came back.”

“Did you run out of work over there?”

“N-No! It’s the opposite!” I retorted, irritated.

“I know. Judging from your lively expression, you got a new job, which I assume is in Kansai since you came back. From your luggage, I can see that you came here directly from the station. Do you need something from me?” As usual, Holmes guessed everything right like he was some kind of psychic. It scared me at first, but now that I’m used to it, it’s nice that it speeds up

conversations.

“Y-Yeah, something like that. But why do you guys look so depressed?” I walked over and sat down on the couch.

The owner sighed, his hand pressed to his forehead. “I’ll be taking Kiyotaka with me to a bunch of art galleries in other prefectures over the next little while.”

“Huh.”

“Some phonies got into the system.”

“What?”

“He means that forgeries got mixed in with real artwork. They’re elaborate ones too,” Holmes answered listlessly, slumping his shoulders.

“It’s a damn shame that they got past the curators’ eyes and are now brazenly on display. I called Yanagihara and the other appraisers to let them know to keep an eye out. Still, I’m surprised a better counterfeiter than Yoneyama showed up.”

“Indeed...”

The two men sighed deeply.

“Who’s Yoneyama?” I asked, tilting my head.

Holmes smiled weakly. “A counterfeiter that my grandfather exposed in the past. He’s atoned for his sins and now works at an art gallery. He’s got quite the skill. We used to talk about how counterfeiters at his level were a rare sight. Unfortunately, another one did appear.”

“Well, there’s always new ones cropping up,” said the owner. “Kyoto also used to have a really good one that even fooled me back in my younger days. I’ve said it before and I’ll say it again: counterfeiters have critical eyes too. We appraisers have to stay above them.”

“I see,” I said.

“Part of the problem is that we aren’t training exceptional appraisers, though. I need you to hurry up and become fully qualified, Kiyotaka.”

“Yes, I’m working on it.”

“Anyway, I gotta go meet up with Yanagihara. It’s on you tomorrow, Kiyotaka.” The owner slowly stood up. His face lacked its usual vigor. It must’ve stung to find out that there were counterfeits on display at art galleries.

“Yes, I’ll be there. But there’s no need to pretend to be depressed. I know you’re about to go fool around in Ponto-cho,” Holmes said bluntly. Ponto-cho is one of Kyoto’s six geisha districts.

“Quiet, you! It’s the source of my energy!” the owner snapped as he left the store. *I guess he’s the same as always.*

Holmes gently looked me in the eye. “So, what did you need, Akihito?”

“O-Oh, right. I’m being assigned to a new program.” I pulled myself together and explained it to Holmes. The episodes were only five minutes long, but it was going to be broadcast on a national network. My job was to introduce the beautiful city of Kyoto, and the first episode was going to be about Nanzen-ji Temple. “I’ve shown my friends around Yasaka Shrine and Kiyomizu-dera Temple and stuff before, but I’m not familiar with Nanzen-ji. So I thought it’d be a good idea to go with you first.”

Holmes frowned blatantly. “In other words, you’re telling me to give you a tour of Nanzen-ji Temple.”

“Yeah, since you seem like you know everything.”

“I don’t know *everything*... Can’t you research it online or read some books instead?” He took a sip of his coffee, seemingly uninterested.

“N-No, it’s not the same.”

“How is it different?”

“When I read about things, it’s like they don’t stick in my head. They don’t strike a chord with me. I don’t know why, but your explanations are way better! I remember all the stuff you said about my dad’s will and the Gion Festival tapestries. So, please come to Nanzen-ji with me and teach me! I feel like the first episode’s gonna be really important.” I leaned in, feeling desperate.

Holmes looked at me, his face unchanging. *Urk... What’s with that cold*

expression? Is he grossed out by my passion? Maybe he thinks I'm annoying.

After a short while, Holmes nodded and said quietly, "All right."

"Huh?" I squeaked.

"I can't decline after hearing all of that. I'll go to Nanzen-ji with you. However, could we make it tomorrow? I know it's sudden."

"Y-Yeah, that's fine. Is tomorrow convenient for you?"

"It's perfect timing. I have to go there tomorrow afternoon," he said flatly.

I froze. "O-Oh, so you had a reason to be there anyway." *Come to think of it, the owner said, "It's on you tomorrow." That must've been about Nanzen-ji.*

"Yes, which has nothing to do with helping you."

"Yeah, but..."

"Well, if it's a program promoting Kyoto, then I do want to help. Learn as much as you can so that you can communicate the city's wonders," Holmes said firmly.

"I-I will," I replied, quickly straightening my back. *Why do I feel way more tense than I do when my manager tells me these things?*

"Now, let's take a look at some reference material in advance," Holmes said, taking a thick book from the shelf.

Come to think of it...this guy's younger than me, right? Watching him gracefully open the book, I smiled bitterly at the difference between us.

3

So, the next day we were going to Nanzen-ji. The plan was to meet at 11:00 a.m. at Sanmon gate, the entrance to the temple. I figured I'd go by car, but Holmes put an end to that thought, saying, "Akihito, please take the bus or subway to Nanzen-ji."

Huh, but why? I wondered.

Holmes continued, "Most tourists coming to Kyoto use public transportation.

If you're going to be presenting the city to them, it's important to use public transit to better sympathize with them. You normally go everywhere by car, right?"

I couldn't object to that. *It's true that I default to the car. I never think about taking public transit to sightseeing spots in the first place. If I'm bringing someone with me, it's always places within walking distance, like Gion to Yasaka Shrine and Kiyomizu-dera Temple.*

"If you're taking the bus, then get off at Nanzen-ji Eikando Road. If you're taking the subway, then it's Keage Station. Personally, I recommend taking the subway to Keage Station and passing through the Nejirimampo 'spiral' tunnel on the way to Nanzen-ji Temple."

"Huh? Is that one of those waterways?" I asked. Holmes squinted at me.

Despite growing up in Kyoto—or perhaps *because* I grew up in Kyoto—there are a lot of things I don't know. Even the famous Kinkaku-ji Temple is somewhere I've only been once, on an elementary school field trip. I feel like we went to other places on school trips too, but I don't really remember any of them.

"No, it's a very small tunnel, more like a pipeline. It's made out of brick and leads to Nanzen-ji Temple. It's worth seeing, so please do," Holmes explained.

"Huh, okay." I nodded.

And so, for the first time in a long time, I got on the subway at Karasuma Oike Station. Since it was a weekday morning, there weren't many passengers. It was only four stops until Keage Station, so I'd be there in a flash. *Kyoto's roads are narrow and chaotic, so this is probably way faster than driving,* I thought, looking at the route map.

I got off at Keage Station and the first thing I saw after exiting was a blindingly green hill. It was part of the Keage water purification plant. They always kept it well-maintained, and it was full of azaleas that bloomed in May. I remembered coming here as a kid with my family to see the purification plant, the nearby zoo, and the Keage Incline. My dad would point at the now-abandoned railroad and say, "These tracks were once used by a train that transported boats." Mom

would say, “The cherry blossoms would’ve been in full bloom if we’d come last month. This is a famous spot for them.” Naturally we all talked about coming during the next year’s cherry blossom season, but in the end, we never did. *It’s like that with a lot of places. You figure you can go any time since it’s in the city, so you wind up never going. I’m sure that if the cherry blossoms were blooming around this unused, elegant railroad, it’d be a sight to behold. Now that Dad’s gone, it’s a shame that we couldn’t see them as a family. Hopefully I can talk about them next spring on this TV program.* I felt energized by the thought.

The Nejirimanpo tunnel really was close by. It was a small arch made of brick. It looked straight out of the Meiji era, but at the same time, it also seemed like something you’d see in a small village in a foreign country. When you went inside, the brick pattern shifted as if the tunnel was being twisted.

“Oh, so that’s why he called it the ‘spiral’ tunnel,” I thought as I passed through, impressed.

After coming out the other side and walking for a bit, I saw Nanzen-ji Temple’s Sanmon gate. I looked up at the huge entranceway made of blackened wood, taken aback by how imposing it was. The round pillars supporting it were thick and strong. I felt like I was being swallowed up by the gate’s magnificence. *Is this what it means to experience history firsthand? How can a gate be so powerful?*

“Good morning,” came a voice from behind me as I was standing stock still. Surprised, I turned around and saw Holmes, who was wearing a jacket and jeans. Simple and casual, but fashionable. The style suited his good looks and physique. *Damn, what a good-looking guy. He’s not gonna stand out more than me, right?* Whenever I see him, it ends up feeling like a competition.

“Could you refrain from glaring at me the moment you see me?” Holmes said with a smile.

I panicked and shook my head. “I-I wasn’t glaring.”

“How was the walk from Keage Station?” he asked as he walked slowly towards me.

“N-Not bad.”

“Passing through the foreign flair of the Nejirimanpo tunnel and then looking at the Sanmon gate gives you a mysterious feeling, and at the same time, there’s a powerful sensation, as if your chest is being held in an eagle’s grip. Right?” Holmes said quietly, looking up at the gate.

I think I know what he means. I felt the same thing.

“I wanted you to experience that sensation, Akihito,” he continued.

I smiled bitterly at how it’d gone exactly the way he wanted.

“This is the head temple of the Nanzen-ji branch of the Rinzai sect of Zen Buddhism. It’s the highest ranked out of all of Japan’s Zen temples.”

The highest ranked?! I didn’t know that.

“The Sanmon gate stands twenty-two meters tall. It conveys the temple’s significance well, right?”

“Y-Yeah.” It really had an impressive aura. It felt like I was being overwhelmed by an invisible force.

“Now then, shall we climb up to the gate’s balcony?” Holmes pointed at the second tier of the gate.

“Yeah!” I nodded enthusiastically. As it turned out, you needed to pay an entrance fee to go up there. “Oh, I’ll pay! I’m the one who asked you for help, after all.” I stepped forward, but Holmes quickly held out a ticket. “Huh?”

“I arrived early, so I bought tickets already. Let’s go.” He smiled.

I accepted the ticket, totally defeated by his gentlemanliness. *He’s too good!* I could’ve fallen over right on the spot.

“I really am learning a lot from you, Holmes,” I mumbled. Holmes smiled cheerfully in response.

The temple grounds were pretty empty because of the time of day and week. No one was climbing the gate at this hour.

“Akihito, the stairs are very steep. Watch your step.” Holmes gestured for me to go first. As he said, the wooden stairs leading to the top of the gate were surprisingly steep. Not-so-brave people might have to crawl up on all fours.

I nodded and started climbing. I could see Holmes's hand firmly gripping the handrail behind mine, indicating that he was right behind me. *Oh, it's so that he can catch me if I slip. He's a gentleman even when he's accompanying a guy, huh? Maybe it's because he accompanies the owner so much. As an apprentice, he'd constantly be thinking ahead. Since he's used to it, he naturally does it with other people too.*

When I reached the second floor corridor, I felt the autumn breeze blow through. From this height, I could look out over the temple grounds. I saw trees in the midst of changing color as well as the people visiting the temple.

"Wh-Whoa," I exclaimed in admiration, holding the railing with both hands.

Holmes smiled and nodded. "A 'magnificent, magnificent view,' right?"

"Huh?"

"It's from a kabuki play. The legendary thief Goemon Ishikawa, who existed in real life, sits atop this gate, smoking a pipe. He looks out and says, 'A magnificent, magnificent view.' Do you think you understand what he meant?" Holmes had a pleasant smile on his face as he looked at the scenery. There were the beautiful trees in the temple grounds, and if you looked farther out, you could see all of the flavors of Kyoto in one sweeping view. The famous "Dai" and boat symbols from Gozan no Okuribi were visible, too.

"Yeah, it sure is magnificent. Dang, so Goemon Ishikawa climbed up here too."

"No, he didn't."

"Huh?"

"It's a kabuki play. This gate was built after Goemon Ishikawa's execution, so he didn't actually climb it."

"What the heck?"

"It just goes to show how fascinated the people of Kyoto were by this view," he said. He looked out at the scenery again and I followed his lead.

Oh, so they were moved by the view and wanted to write about it. I can understand that feeling. I nodded in acknowledgment.

Holmes looked at me, seeming pleased. “Akihito, your strength lies in how upfront you are with your feelings. Please remember this feeling and show the viewers how moved you were.”

His words made my chest feel hot. Being upfront with my feelings... That might’ve been the first time anyone said that about me. It made me sincerely want to communicate my honest impressions rather than trying to gloss over them.

“But, please refrain from saying things like ‘Whoa’ and ‘What the heck?’ on television. You’re supposed to be representing Kyoto men on that program,” Holmes said bluntly.

“I-I know, okay?!” I crossed my arms, sulking.

“Now then, we’ll be going inside the temple later, so first, let’s look at the aqueduct and have lunch,” Holmes said, checking the time.

“Oh, I’ll pay for lunch! As in, please let me! I want to treat you!” I grabbed his hand eagerly.

“Thanks, but you don’t have to shout or hold my hand. The woman over there seems to have gotten the wrong idea, and now she’s blushing. I’m very reluctant to have our relationship misunderstood.” His derisive smile sent chills down my spine.

We descended the gate, entered the temple grounds, and approached the old-fashioned arches of the aqueduct. The brick bridge had a historic aesthetic, like something you’d see in ancient Roman or European ruins. Thinking about it, this was the first time I’d come to see it.

“This aqueduct was a great accomplishment of the Meiji era. On top of the bridge flows a stream that branches from the Lake Biwa Canal. Even though it’s been over a hundred and twenty years since it was built, it’s still carrying out its purpose wonderfully.” Holmes gently touched one of the bricks and looked up at the bridge. It was a bit odd for such a foreign-looking brick bridge to be next to the top-ranked Zen temple in Japan, and yet it fit in surprisingly well. Red brick supports formed a series of arches. They had a mysterious aura, as though I’d wandered into another world.

“Wow. I never would’ve thought a bridge like this would be right next to Nanzen-ji Temple.”

“Its construction was apparently heavily criticized. So, in order to not disrupt the environment, they decided on a Western-style aqueduct that was unprecedented at the time. Now it has perfectly blended into the natural scenery. It’s a fine example of mixing Japanese and Western styles. It’s also designated as one of Kyoto’s official historic landmarks.”

He’s just like a tour guide. I knew it was a good idea to ask him. But... “This kind of feels like somewhere you’d want to go on a date. Girls would probably love it.” *Wait, maybe I shouldn’t say that when it’s just the two of us.*

“I agree,” Holmes said without hesitation.

I couldn’t help but laugh. “By the way, do you have a girlfriend?” I assumed he had something going on with Aoi, but apparently not. *A gentlemanly scholar like him probably has someone, though.*

“I don’t.”

“For real? I would’ve thought they’d be lining up to date you.”

“I have a unique condition. When I’m with someone, I end up figuring out everything about them. I can tell if they’re lying to me or only acting in self-interest. It’s all too obvious.”

I found myself nodding. *True, he’d be able to see through everything about his partner. No matter how perfect of a liar a girl is, he’ll notice.*

“I’ve seen too much of that kind of thing,” Holmes continued. “Also, my first relationship ended in a painful betrayal.”

“You were betrayed by the first girl you dated?” Now that was a surprise. Who would’ve thought that he had a past like that?

“Yes, and it made me completely apathetic towards women. I wound up preferring short-term relationships with people who wouldn’t try to get deeply involved.” He sighed.

...Wait, did he just say what I think he said? With that refined face? I fell silent.

“Well, it’s far from a commendable story, so let’s keep it between us.” Holmes lifted his finger to his mouth and smiled.

“S-Sure.” *Man, this guy’s kind of sneaky.* “Hey, how about Aoi?”

“What about her?”

“I assumed she was special to you.”

Holmes smiled subtly at that but didn’t say anything.

“Oh, so she *is* special.”

“I’m not sure if I’d call it that. The first time she came to our store, she broke down in tears...and I felt like I was seeing my past self.”

“Yourself?”

“Yes. The circumstances of her heartbreak were very similar to mine. However, I didn’t end up like that. Instead, I desperately tried to protect my self-esteem and maintain appearances. So, when I saw her openly displaying her weakness and disgrace, not caring about embarrassing herself, I was envious of her. She looked radiant to me. It made me want to help her,” Holmes murmured, as if talking to himself. He had a distant look in his eyes. There was this unapproachable aura around him, and I didn’t know what to say.

“M-Man, sure is nice weather today, huh? Hard to believe it’s fall when it’s so hot.” I made a fanning motion with my hand, trying to change the topic.

“Today’s high is twenty-six degrees Celsius. Would you like to use this?” Holmes took a folding fan out of his inner pocket and offered it to me.

Dang, this guy’s prepared for everything. I was impressed at first, but now I’m kind of sick of it.

“N-No, it’s not so bad that I need to use a fan.”

“All right. Shall we get lunch, then?” He put the fan back in his pocket.

“Yeah, I was waiting for you to say that.” I nodded firmly, and we left the aqueduct.

We had lunch at a nearby restaurant that specialized in simmered tofu. As I watched Holmes's elegant table manners, I thought, *So this is how you look refined when you eat. I'll keep this in mind when I'm eating on camera.*

As I was observing him closely, he chuckled and said, "You're eager, I see." He'd figured out that I was watching him to use him as a reference.

I gave an awkward, strained laugh. "Oh right, so did you get called to Nanzen-ji for an appraisal job?"

"I don't think so."

"Huh, it's something else?"

"I haven't heard the details yet, but they said they wanted a consultation, so it's probably not an appraisal."

"A consultation, huh?" *Normally people go to temples for advice, not the other way around. That's pretty amazing. I wonder what they're going to talk about?* I was starting to get a bit excited.

After lunch we walked back to Nanzen-ji Temple at a relaxed pace. This time we went straight to the lecture hall, passing under the Sanmon gate. The place had an exquisite air to it. The surrounding trees had begun to change color, but they weren't fully red yet.

"I bet this place'll be really nice at the peak of autumn."

"I'm sure it'll be filmed for your program when the time comes. I'm looking forward to the broadcast."

We talked quietly as we walked. I'd been looking forward to filming, but Holmes's words got me nervous. *If he's going to be watching, then I really have to focus on doing a good job.*

"It's almost time for my appointment, so let's go to the *honbo*."

"The what?"

"The head priest's residence. He's the one who called for me."

Walking in that direction, we came upon a large Japanese-style estate with

white walls and a black tiled roof. Despite it being the head priest's residence, it looked like anyone could go in if they paid the entrance fee. I spotted sightseers here and there.

A young priest was standing in front of the building. When he saw us, he bowed deeply. "Yagashira, right?" he asked with a gentle smile.

"Yes."

"It's nice to meet you. I'm one of Nanzen-ji Temple's priests, Ensho. Thank you very much for coming today. Please, come this way."

The priest named Ensho guided us inside. As we followed him, I noticed a big calligraphy screen on display in the Japanese-style room. It had two Chinese characters on it, but the writing was too artistic for me to make out.

"What does this say?" I asked.

Holmes stopped walking and answered, "It says 'Zuiryu,' meaning 'auspicious dragon.' Zuiryu is Nanzen-ji Temple's mountain name." Buddhist temples in Japan have multiple names, but only the main one is commonly used. The mountain name is called that because temples are metaphorically referred to as mountains.

Ensho looked surprised at how readily Holmes answered my question. He nodded and said, "Yes. This was written by the eighth head priest of Nanzen-ji Temple, Kikusen Shimada. I'm impressed that you knew Nanzen-ji's mountain name. No wonder you're called the Holmes of Kyoto."

"No, I'm only called 'Holmes' because my surname is Yagashira," Holmes replied with a smile. *Why does he always give that answer?*

"There's no need to be humble. I've heard about your accomplishments, such as the one at Ninna Temple."

"Ah, the case at Ninna Temple..." Holmes nodded.

I leaned over to him. "Hey, what'd you do at Ninna Temple?"

"I simply appraised a tea bowl," he said nonchalantly.

I frowned. *Damn it, he doesn't want to bother telling me. There's no way it was just an appraisal.*

Ensho stopped and turned to face us as if he'd just remembered something. "If you don't mind, would you like to see our prized treasures before going to the guest room?"

"Why, of course." Holmes smiled, looking genuinely happy.

"Right this way, then." Ensho quickly bowed and started walking again. His subtle gestures and mannerisms had a refined quality to them, like Holmes's. You could tell he was a priest at a high-ranking temple.

"Oh yeah, Holmes, what'd you think of that writing?" I whispered. I couldn't read what it said, but I could tell it was impressive. How much was it worth?

"Hmm. I thought it was quite significant," he answered quietly as we walked.

"This is the *hojo*—the head priest's quarters," Ensho said as we arrived at the building. "It's a designated national treasure."

On the left side of the residence was a large entranceway with a curved gabled roof. We entered the head priest's quarters through it.

"It is said that this building was originally the emperor's residence that was transported here from the Imperial Palace. The paintings on the sliding doors are also our temple's prized possessions," Ensho explained, his eyes lighting up with pride.

Holmes seemed happy as he looked around the building. "This is my first time inside here. The vivid painted doors are truly magnificent," he said passionately, staring at the paintings.

"Yeah, they're really nice."

I took my phone out of my pocket to take a picture, but Ensho interrupted me, saying, "Sorry, no photos allowed." He put his hands together apologetically.

I stopped in my tracks, and he chuckled at my disappointed face before saying, "However, this is fine to photograph. The statue of Hanshan and Shide is another of our treasures." He pointed at a statue of two monks standing right up against each other. "Hanshan and Shide are the names of two monks from the Tang dynasty. They have quite an eccentric story, so their legend became

the subject of many statues and paintings.”

“I see...” Despite his recommendation, I couldn’t bring myself to take a picture of a statue of two old men being chummy. Holmes on the other hand was looking at it as excitedly as ever.

I went around, looking at the porcelain vases and hanging scrolls with dragons painted on them.

“‘Dragon and Clouds’ is another one of the temple’s treasures, right? We went to the lecture hall earlier, but unfortunately, it wasn’t open to the public, so we couldn’t see it.” Holmes placed his hand on his chest, seeming disappointed.

“Dragon and Clouds?” I said.

“On the ceiling of the main building is a painting of a dragon by the artist Keinen Imao.”

“Oh yeah, that’s common in temples.”

“Would you like to see it right now?” Ensho asked.

I was appalled. *We already came this far; we don’t need to go all the way back to the main building!* I screamed internally.

“Of course,” Holmes answered, nodding firmly. *I guess he’ll never pass up a chance to look at art.*

Unlike me who thought it was a total drag, Holmes and Ensho walked briskly towards the main building. Even their hurried walking looked refined for some reason.

“Man, I dunno what it is, but you and Ensho have a similar aura.”

“What?” Holmes turned around. “Is that so?”

“Oh, you don’t notice things about yourself? Something about you two just feels the same. Maybe you’re the priestly type.” I chuckled.

“Despite how I look, I have plenty of worldly desires,” Holmes said with a smile. “Oh right, Akihito. Nanzen-ji’s cover tiles also have dragons on them.” He looked up at the roof.

“Cover tiles?” Confused, I looked up and saw that the corner of the roof had a sculpture of a dragon’s head on it. “Huh, I didn’t notice that.” *Pretty nice.*

Ensho clasped his hands in front of his chest, seeming impressed. “Indeed, there are many who don’t see them. Well done.”

“That’s not something you need to praise me for.” Holmes shrugged with a strained smile.

We continued into the main building where the painting was. On the ceiling was a dragon in a circle, staring down at us. It was gripping a jewel. The entire painting was tinged with blue.

“It really is splendid,” Holmes said passionately, gazing at the ceiling painting.

“We actually wanted you to look at this dragon painting,” Ensho said quietly.

“Is there an issue with it?”

“We’ll explain at the head priest’s residence.” Ensho bowed with a pensive look. Holmes and I exchanged glances.

5

We returned to the head priest’s residence again and entered the “Waterfall Room.” It was a beautiful, spacious Japanese-style room, and as the name implied, you could see waterfalls from it. Three men were sitting there, waiting for us.

“Greetings. I am the assistant head priest, Unsho.” The elderly priest bowed.

The next to bow was a priest who looked to be in his thirties. “My name is Shoan.”

Last was a middle-aged man wearing working clothes who seemed to be a laborer. “I’m the gardener, Kikuchi.”

“It’s nice to meet you all. My name is Kiyotaka Yagashira.” Holmes bowed deeply, and the three men returned the gesture.

“I’m Akihito Kajiwara. Nice to meet you.” I bowed too, feeling kind of awkward.

The assistant head priest, Unsho, was sitting in the middle, while Ensho and Shoan sat by the walls on either side of him. The gardener, Kikuchi, sat a bit farther away. Unsho and Ensho wore peaceful smiles on their faces, but the younger priest, Shoan, had a serious expression. I'd thought that Ensho resembled Holmes, but he was also just like the assistant head priest. *Maybe refined people all have the same aura.* The unrefined Shoan seemed somewhat on edge. Meanwhile, the gardener Kikuchi seemed like he was kind of just there.

Come to think of it... Where's the head priest?

"I apologize for calling you here so suddenly," the assistant head priest said meekly.

Holmes shook his head and said, "It's fine." He then leaned in slightly. "What did you wish to talk about?"

The assistant head priest sighed lightly before beginning his story. "The head priest is actually away right now for a seminar. It's a two week trip, and on the third day he was gone, the gardener Kikuchi found this letter on our temple's grounds." He took out a white envelope from his robes and held it out to Holmes.

"One moment." Holmes took his white gloves out of his pocket, put them on, and opened the envelope. Inside was a sheet of writing paper that said:

"Dear Nanzen-ji Temple, I've helped myself to your dragon."

The letter was written with a brush, in rather fancy handwriting. Holmes's eyebrow twitched ever so slightly, but I couldn't tell what he was thinking.

"When I read this letter, I first assumed that it was a prank, but just in case, I checked all of the dragon-related objects in the temple. However, nothing was stolen. So, I thought it must've indeed been a prank," said the assistant head priest. Ensho and Shoan both nodded from either side of him. "Then, another three days later, Shoan found the exact same letter. It was discovered in the early morning, under the statue of Hanshan and Shide. As far as we're aware, it was not there the night before."

Now that's a surprise. That's the statue of the two old men we saw before, right? Did someone sneak in in the middle of the night and put it there?

"I see. That is indeed unpleasant in various ways, whether it was the act of an insider or the crime of an outsider." Holmes nodded while looking at the letter.

Right, if it was an insider, then it'd be a prank, in very poor taste. If it was an outsider, then that would be trespassing. Purposely putting a letter like that under a temple's treasure is malicious in itself.

"Yes. However, I found it peculiar that nothing was stolen. Then I heard that Seiji's grandson had a sharp mind, so I thought to ask for help."

I see; so that's why he chose Holmes.

"This letter is handwritten. I hate to trouble you, but would it be possible to show me the handwriting of everyone at the temple?"

"Should we have them write something?"

"No, I want to see what they've already written," Holmes answered immediately. I definitely agreed. If they wrote something new, they'd consciously change their handwriting.

The assistant head priest looked to Ensho and Shoan, and they quickly stood up and left. They soon returned with a book of hand-copied sutras.

"Also, this is the gardener Kikuchi's handwriting." It was a single envelope. It looked like an ordinary letter of thanks.

"Thank you very much. Allow me to take a look." Holmes bowed and quickly skimmed through the words on the sutras and the envelope. *I thought he'd go a lot slower than that.*

The assistant head priest's handwriting was impressively artistic. Ensho and Shoan's weren't quite there, but they were neat enough that even an amateur like me could read them. We looked at the other priests' handwriting, and lastly, Holmes reached for the sutra written by the absent head priest.

I gasped when I saw it. Even a normal person like me could tell that it closely resembled the mystery letter. The priests in the room seemed to have just noticed too, because their faces stiffened.

“Thank you very much. I understand now.” Holmes closed the sutra book and looked up.

Yeah, I figured it out too. The head priest’s the culprit. No idea why, but there’s no doubt that he’s the one who wrote “Dear Nanzen-ji Temple, I’ve helped myself to your dragon.”

“As it says in that letter, Nanzen-ji Temple’s precious ‘dragon’ has already been stolen,” Holmes said, staring straight at the assistant head priest.

Everyone was speechless. I ended up being the first to speak up: “Wh-What do you mean, the dragon’s already been stolen?”

Shoan nodded. “I’m not sure what you mean, either. We told you that we checked and found that nothing was stolen.”

Ensho and the assistant head priest looked surprised, but calmly waited for Holmes’s next words. Kikuchi’s eyes made it obvious that he was thinking, “What’s this guy saying?”

“Perhaps it would be more accurate to say that Nanzen-ji Temple’s precious treasure has been *switched out*,” Holmes continued in a peaceful tone.

The treasures we’ve seen so far...

The dragon painting on the ceiling? I don’t think you can switch out something like that.

The dragon head on the roof? Is that considered a treasure?

Other than that, there were the vases, hanging scrolls, and...the statue of the two old men that they found the letter at? What if that symbolizes a dragon somehow? Maybe there’s a hidden story behind it that hints at dragons. Oh, what about the sliding door that I wasn’t allowed to take a picture of?

...No. Holmes praised that statue and the sliding doors when he saw them. He also called the ceiling painting “splendid.” Come to think of it, there was just one thing...that he didn’t praise. The one thing that he called “significant”...

“Your ‘Zuiryu’ calligraphy is a fake,” Holmes declared. *Zuiryu—auspicious dragon.* The room was instantly filled with anxiety.

“Y-Yagashira, we see that every day. I think we’d notice immediately if it were

switched out,” Ensho said, bewildered.

Shoan nodded firmly. “He’s right. How could someone switch out something so big in the first place?”

The assistant head priest remained calm and returned Holmes’s gaze. “Kiyotaka, have you seen that calligraphy in the past?”

“Yes, several times. However, even if I hadn’t seen it before, I still would’ve known that it was fake,” Holmes replied immediately. Everyone, including me, was surprised.

“How so?” the assistant head priest asked. His tone wasn’t accusing—he seemed genuinely curious. The rest of us probably felt the same way.

“My grandfather often says that ‘In the end, a fake’s a fake. It’s not real.’”

The rest of us looked around at each other. Kikuchi still had that “What’s this guy saying?” look on his face. *Sorry Holmes, but I feel the same way. What are you saying?*

“Even if an appraiser is shown a forgery of a work they’ve never seen before, they can still tell that it’s fake. Genuine works have genuine lines, and fake works have fake lines.

“Fake works always have calculated lines that want to deceive and delude. They can’t be hidden—no matter how identical the colors and shapes are, an appraiser can sense something unpleasant and wrong.”

Everyone quietly listened to Holmes’s words.

“However, occasionally there are fakes that can even fool an appraiser’s eyes. We call these ‘elaborate counterfeits.’ Unlike the common forgery, these ones don’t contain the intent to deceive. The counterfeiter enters a trancelike state, as if he’s become the artist himself, and copies the work. These elaborate copies don’t have those unpleasant lines. As such, appraisers are sometimes tricked by them.”

His explanation reminded me of what he and the owner were saying yesterday, about the counterfeits that made it past the eyes of art gallery curators. *Those might be the very copies he’s talking about.*

“Nevertheless, they’re still fakes. Even if you can’t see the calculated lines, they don’t have the same aura as the originals. The Zuiryu calligraphy was switched out by a counterfeiter that possesses that remarkable copying ability. It’s only natural that a layman wouldn’t be able to tell. In fact, even an appraiser might’ve been fooled.”

I see. So that’s why Holmes called it “significant.” In that one moment, he identified that it was a counterfeit. He’s damn scary for his age.

Holmes paused to catch his breath, then placed his hands firmly on the tatami floor and faced Unsho. “Assistant head priest, Nanzen-ji Temple is known for once having a ghost problem. I hear that those apparitions disappeared when the Zen priest Fumon Mukan visited from Tofuku-ji Temple. It’s been around seven hundred years since then. Unfortunately, you now have another imposter lurking in your midst,” he declared.

The assistant head priest squinted. “An imposter?”

“Yes, right here!” As soon as Holmes said that, he whipped out something that looked like a knife from his inside pocket and flung it at Ensho’s head. A loud, bursting sound rang out.

Everyone gasped in horror. When I came back to my senses, I saw Ensho catching the knife-like object above his head, like when someone stops a sword attack between their bare hands. The object that Holmes had thrown wasn’t a knife; it was his folding fan.

“Whoa there, that’s a scary thing to do with a sweet face like that. Were you trying to break open my head?” Ensho continued to hold the fan up. A twisted grin rose to his face.

“I aimed right above your head, hoping to give you a scare. I didn’t expect you to catch it. Impressive.”

“Seriously? You would’ve put a real dent in my head. Anyway, I thought you’d be a well-behaved lad, but you’re pretty savage, eh? Sure didn’t expect you to suddenly come for my head.”

“You say that, but it’s only a folding fan.” Holmes chuckled.

“I could feel the bloodlust.” Ensho’s hands trembled as they held the fan. “By

the way, when did you figure it out?" Despite the situation, he looked confident, his eyes gleaming.

It was a bizarre scene. Ensho was still holding Holmes's fan above his head. The two were glaring at each other but smiling. The rest of us were stunned, unable to move or speak.

"I felt something was off from the moment we first met."

"Did I mess something up?"

"First off, you knew who I was from the very beginning. Out of all of the sightseers there, you singled me out immediately when you saw me. I originally said I was going to come alone. Even though I suddenly decided to bring a companion, you didn't hesitate to greet me. That gave me the impression that you were involved in my being called to this temple.

"Next, when we were in front of the Zuiryu calligraphy, you were a bit nervous, right? Actually, now that I think about it, you might've been excited instead. You suddenly started talking more, and your breathing was a bit irregular as you spoke. At first, I thought the temple was in a situation where it temporarily had to replace everything with fakes, and you were afraid that I'd find out.

"Then, there was your imitative nature. You're a copier down to the core, with a habit of imitating the expressions and mannerisms of nearby people. Akihito told me early on that you resembled me. Later on, you mimicked the assistant head priest's aura, and your handwriting was very similar to Shoan's. For that letter, you copied the head priest's writing on purpose, right? You would've easily been able to obtain what you wanted, so why would you go to such lengths?" Holmes asked.

Ensho's expression softened. "I got better at counterfeiting, and no one noticed that my works were fakes anymore. It felt good at first, but before long, it got boring. So, I figured I'd atone for my sins and enter the priesthood. Took a bit of trickery, but I got in.

"Then the other day, I found out that you saw through one of my counterfeits, after all these years of silence. I suddenly got this longing ache for what I'd forgotten."

“It wasn’t just me who saw through it. My grandfather did too,” Holmes stated.

Ensho snickered. “Yeah, well, if an old geezer with decades of experience figures it out, there’s not much I can do about that. When I found out that you did it—that you were younger than me and smart enough to be nicknamed ‘Holmes,’ I wanted to challenge you.

“I put a lot of painstaking effort into that calligraphy. You saw through it right away, but it was a pretty good work of art, right?”

“You can’t call that art,” Holmes said, suddenly switching to his Kyoto accent. “An artificial flower cannot be called a flower when all it has is the shape; it has no scent. An artificial flower is artificial. It’s nothing like a real flower. Some may beg to differ, but I will not recognize deceptive counterfeits as ‘art.’ It’d be impudent to do so.” A terrifying, scornful smile rose to his face.

Ensho looked amused. “You really know how to talk, eh? But I see now; that’s your true nature. You’re like a whole different person with that scary aura, but hey, I like it way more than your goody-two-shoes mode. You’re pretty messed-up too, huh?”

“Thanks. So, where’s the real Zuiryu calligraphy?”

“It’s in the temple storehouse. You’ll find it right away if you look. Now that I know you’re around, I have a reason to stick around in this world. Anyway, I lost this time, so I’ll be taking my leave. See ya.” Ensho grinned and shoved Holmes away. He dashed out of the room, still holding the folding fan.

“You’re not getting away!” Holmes immediately went to give chase, but was interrupted by the assistant head priest shouting, “Wait, Kiyotaka!”

Holmes froze for a moment. By the time he came back to his senses, Ensho was gone. Frustrated, he bit his lip, clenched his fists, and clicked his tongue. The sight honestly surprised me. Just like Ensho, I couldn’t believe that he had such a fierce side beneath his well-behaved mask. My mind couldn’t keep up with these rapid developments, but I felt oddly impressed.

“Kiyotaka, that is a ninja. No matter how confident you are in your abilities, a sheltered boy isn’t going to be able to catch him. It’s a waste of time and

energy,” the assistant head priest said quietly.

Holmes twitched at that and frowned. He turned around and said, “I appreciate your concern, but I am not a ‘sheltered boy.’” His mouth was smiling, but it was clear as day that he disapproved of what the assistant head priest said.

“I know you’re no ordinary person, but you can’t win against Ensho in terms of physical ability.”

“You...don’t seem particularly surprised by all of this. Did you already figure it out?”

“I didn’t realize that the Zuiryu calligraphy had been switched out, but I knew that Ensho was not normal. I also sensed that he bore a past that he could not reveal. However, if someone resolves to enter the priesthood, it is our duty to accept his will. I know not what happened to Ensho in the past, but he discarded his earthly life, chanted the name of Buddha, repented for his sins, and was very close to becoming a full-fledged priest. However, when he learned of your existence, he felt a lingering attachment to this world. If a seasoned veteran such as Seiji saw through him, it would sting, but he would be able to give up. However, since you’re younger than him, being exposed by you hurt his pride.

“At the same time, I believe that Ensho was happy that you saw through his counterfeits. After living in the shadows for so long, he may have felt acknowledged, and that he’d found his destined rival. Now that it’s come to this, he can’t live inconspicuously anymore... It’s ironic,” the assistant head priest murmured with a distant look.

“Will you be reporting this to the police?”

“He said that the calligraphy is in the storehouse, and I’m inclined to believe that. In the end, nothing was stolen. Besides, the police won’t be of any help against that ninja.”

“What are you going to do, then? Let him go free?” Holmes questioned in a strong, somewhat irritated tone.

The assistant head priest smiled. “You will stop him.”

“Huh?”

“I ask you to catch Ensho, ‘Holmes of Kyoto.’”

Holmes’s eyes widened.

“In the end, we were unable to fill the void in Ensho’s heart. It’s a shame. However, this was inevitable. What will you discover after exposing all of his creations and utterly defeating him? Perhaps it is your fate to learn a lesson from his mistake.” He patted Holmes on the back and smiled as if he’d foreseen and accepted everything. It was overwhelming.

“No wonder you’re the assistant head priest of Nanzen-ji Temple,” Holmes yielded, slumping his shoulders. “You have my word that I’ll expose all of his counterfeits. I’ll show him that the act of counterfeiting itself is futile,” he said with a determined look in his eyes.

6

We gave the assistant head priest our courteous thanks and received a few souvenirs. He asked us to keep what had happened a secret.

We left the head priest’s residence and walked in a leisurely way through the temple grounds. Holmes had a serious look on his face and didn’t say a word the whole time. He probably had a lot on his mind.

“He said to keep it a secret, but you’re going to tell the owner, right?” I asked.

Holmes looked up. “Yes, of course. I’ll report it to the owner...although I’m reluctant to do so.”

“How come?”

“If he finds out that a master counterfeiter challenged me and I let him get away, he’ll definitely scold me. Loudly, like ‘What the heck are you doing, you halfwit?!’” Holmes sighed dejectedly. I imagined the owner bright red with anger, lecturing him endlessly, and winced.

“That’s a shame. You might’ve caught him if the assistant head priest hadn’t stopped you.” Holmes had flinched for a moment when the priest called his name.

“No. As he said, that man has incredible physical ability and excels at imitation. Calling him a ninja wasn’t an exaggeration. Even if I chased him, it would’ve been futile.”

“Huh. Guess he’s pretty amazing.”

“Yes. He’s the worst counterfeiter I’ve encountered so far. However, he once tried to repent and become a priest. I feel conflicted thinking about how my existence prevented that.” Holmes cast his eyes down, looking sad.

Yeah...his existence revived a genius counterfeiter who was going to disappear from the world.

Holmes suddenly looked up and said, “Well, either way, I just have to keep doing my job. No matter what fakes appear, I’ll take them all down.” His fearless smile sent chills down my spine. *I know Ensho’s abnormal, but so’s this guy.*

“Man, I was really spooked when you threw that fan at Ensho. It looked like a knife, and I was seriously too scared to move. I didn’t think you were violent like that.” It happened in the blink of an eye. Ensho really was amazing for being able to catch that.

“‘Violent’ isn’t a very nice way to put it. Ever since I was little, my grandfather pestered me to get stronger, and now I’m essentially his bodyguard. Sometimes we go to countries with poor public safety to buy valuable antiques.”

Oh, so buying expensive antiques in foreign countries is more dangerous than doing it here. He might’ve actually been in some scary situations, then. No wonder he got offended when he was called a “sheltered boy.” I couldn’t help but laugh when I remembered his annoyed face.

“What’s so funny?” Holmes looked sideways.

Knowing him, he can read my mind anyway. “Sorry, I was just thinking I should try not to make you angry.”

“Yes, please don’t. If you do, I’ll dent your head with a folding fan.”

“Wait, that didn’t sound like a joke.”

“It wasn’t.”

“Hey!”

“Anyway, Akihito, do you have plans after this?”

“No, not really.”

“Could you stop by Kura? Since we received so many sweets, I’ll make coffee.” Holmes smiled. It was the best thing I’d heard all day.

“Sounds good. Hey, can you tell me more about the Nanzen-ji ghost while I’m there? I really wanna know.”

“Sure. Aoi’s working today too, so I’ll tell both of you the story, as well as other Kyoto mysteries.” Holmes smiled, looking a bit excited.

“I’m okay with mysteries, but nothing super scary, please. I seriously can’t handle that stuff.”

“Ah, I see. Have you heard about Ichijo Modori Bridge? It’s a rather disturbing tale, but the famous Abe no Seimei...”

“You’re starting already?!” I whined.

Holmes laughed. The sightseers we passed by also glanced in our direction and chuckled lightly.

I frowned, then looked up, suddenly remembering something. “Oh right, Holmes. Could you do me a favor?”

“A favor?” He grimaced as though he had a bad feeling about what I was going to say.

“Don’t make that face. My aunt’s looking for a place that’ll appraise and buy some stuff.”

“Oh, if that’s the case, then she’s more than welcome.”

As we talked, a cool breeze blew through the temple grounds. While the tree leaves still had a way to go, the wind was very much “autumn.” I got the feeling that more things were going to happen as the season progressed, but at any rate, my heart was stolen by the beautiful temple grounds on that fall afternoon.

Chapter 4: A Long Autumn Night

1

It was a very quiet Saturday evening at Kura. I was doing my usual odd jobs when Holmes casually said, as if it were no big deal:

“Aoi, would you be able to do an overnight trip?”

“Huh?”

Overnight? What does he mean by that? Is he really inviting me on a trip with him? Holmes asking me to go on a trip... What? Why? I was so confused I didn’t know what to say.

“Sorry, Aoi.” Holmes smiled apologetically. “It looks like I caused a misunderstanding.”

“Huh?” I squeaked.

“You see, I’m going to be appraising some antiques for Akihito’s aunt soon. They’re in an uninhabited house, and since there are so many of them, Akihito insisted that we stay the night. I’m quite opposed to the thought of spending a night alone with him, so I was wondering if you’d be willing to come too.”

I stared at him blankly. The context was so different from what I was imagining. He has to stay at Akihito’s relative’s empty house with him, so he invited me to come. *Ahhh, I jumped to conclusions just because he called it an overnight trip! Of course there’s no way he’d invite me on a vacation. I-I’m so embarrassed. That said, going on an overnight trip with Holmes and Akihito does seem fun.*

“Is that all right with you, Aoi? It’s next Saturday.”

I came back to my senses and nodded firmly. “Oh, yes. Please bring me with you. Where does Akihito’s aunt live?”

“He said it was near Tofuku-ji Temple. The house belongs to the older sister of

the author Kajiwara. She apparently decided to sell the house after her husband passed away, but first, she wants to sell the things inside.”

I see; the house is probably too big to live in by herself. But still... “Are there so many antiques that you’d have to stay overnight?”

“Her late husband was a collector, and he said he didn’t mind if she sold his antiques after he passed. Well, I don’t think it’d *require* staying overnight, but Akihito probably wants to spend that day with us.”

“What do you mean?”

“The first episode of that TV program is airing that day.” Holmes grinned.

“Oh!” I clapped my hands. “The program about Kyoto!” I could imagine him wanting to watch it with Holmes.

The phone rang and Holmes quickly picked it up. “Hello, this is Kura.” After a moment, he nodded and said, “Yes, this is Kiyotaka Yagashira speaking.” I continued my usual cleaning, but couldn’t help but listen in. “No, it was nothing... Yes, that’s true.” He smiled. “Ah, all right. I understand. I’ll talk to you later, then. Bye.” He hung up and put the phone back.

Who was that? It didn’t seem like a customer.

“That was someone from Akihito’s agency,” Holmes answered, reading my mind as always.

“You mean the talent agency?” *If I recall correctly, it was a famous one called AK Company.*

“Yes. It was his manager who called.”

“Why would Akihito’s manager be looking for you?”

“Apparently, he was checking the first episode before it goes on air, and he was surprised at how well done it was. When he talked to Akihito about it, my name came up, so he called just to thank me.”

“Really? He must be a diligent person.”

“I think that diligence and thoroughness are necessary traits for working in that industry.”

Oh, that makes sense. I sometimes hear that even though entertainers act chaotic on TV, staff prefer to use the ones that are low-key and diligent behind the scenes.

“You said you’d talk to him, right? Is he going to call again?”

“Yes. He asked if he could call again tonight because he wanted to consult with me about Akihito. I’m expecting him to ask me to go with Akihito again before the next filming and give him advice.”

“Wow, the first episode must’ve been really good, then. I’m looking forward to watching it.”

“Indeed.”

We looked at each other and chuckled.

2

The next Saturday, our plan was to take a look at Tofuku-ji Temple, where Akihito’s next filming would take place, and then go to his aunt’s house.

“If you’re visiting Tofuku-ji Temple in autumn, you must not go by car,” Holmes declared while driving the company’s Jaguar. I was sitting in the passenger seat and Akihito was sitting in the back. The three of us had met up at Kura, then gone to the underground parking lot on Oike Street. Now we were on our way to Tofuku-ji Temple...by car. Akihito and I silently exchanged glances.

“Uh, Holmes, aren’t you contradicting yourself?” Akihito asked, leaning forward a bit. I nodded in agreement.

“Naturally, I won’t be driving directly to Tofuku-ji Temple. Your aunt came to Kura the other day to lend me the house key, so I’ll be parking the car at the house and then walking to Tofuku-ji from there.”

“Ohhh, I get it now.” Akihito nodded.

Holmes dropped me and Akihito off near the temple first. “I’ll head over as soon as I park the car, so you two can start walking first,” he said before driving

off to Akihito's aunt's house.

"Man, he's a smooth guy, huh? If it were me, I would've parked at my aunt's house first, and then the three of us would've walked to the temple together."

"He really is. It might be because he's always attending to the owner."

"I thought so too. Sounds like a tough job though."

"The owner is a free spirit, after all."

We continued to talk as we walked towards the temple gate.

"Aoi, is this your first time going to Tofuku-ji Temple?" Akihito looked at me. He really was a tall, handsome guy. *But for some reason, I don't feel anything when I look at him.*

"Yes. What about you?"

"I only came once in elementary school, so I don't think I remember any of the specifics. Well, let's look at the Sanmon gate first, since it's a National Treasure of Japan and everything," Akihito said lightly, leading the way. He folded his hands behind his head as he walked, saying, "But even though it's a National Treasure, there's no way it'll beat Nanzen-ji's Sanmon gate."

Nanzen-ji was the temple featured in the program that was going to be airing tonight. I heard that Holmes went there with him to check it out beforehand.

"Was Nanzen-ji's Sanmon gate that amazing?"

"Yeah, I was floored. Wait, you haven't been there before, Aoi?"

"No, not yet."

"You really should. The aqueduct was really good too."

"I'd like to."

"Sorry, Aoi, I ended up going on a date at Nanzen-ji with Holmes before you could." He peered at my face with a mischievous grin.

My face went bright red. "Wh-What are you saying?!"

He laughed and I glared at him as we passed through the Rokuhara gate, which was the entrance to the temple grounds.

“The Sanmon gate’s over there...” Akihito said.

“Wow!” I exclaimed the moment I looked up at the towering gate in front of us. It was huge, and the dark brown roof contrasted beautifully with the white walls. It was so tall and wide that it seemed to be saying, “This is the entrance to another world.” I was overwhelmed. It might’ve been the grandest of all of the gates I’d seen so far.

“I-It’s really impressive. The Sanmon gate at Nanzen-ji was even better?”

“Well, they’re both amazing in their own way. But if I had to pick one, I think Nanzen-ji’s was superior.”

“Really?! It must be incredible.”

Akihito took out his phone and started taking pictures. While he praised the gate, I stood a short distance away, gazing up at it.

“Sorry to keep you waiting—you’re still here?” came Holmes’s voice from behind us. We turned to face him.

“Hey, Holmes. Nanzen-ji’s Sanmon gate was great, but this one is too,” Akihito said, putting his hand on Holmes’s shoulder in an overly familiar way.

“This Sanmon gate is said to be the oldest one in Japan, and it’s a designated National Treasure,” Holmes explained as usual. “This *hand* is quite unwelcome.” He lightly brushed Akihito’s hand away.

“Ah! Now that’s just mean.”

I couldn’t help but giggle.

“Geez, you’re so unfriendly,” Akihito sulked. “Hey, does that mean that this one’s better than Nanzen-ji’s?” He looked up at the huge gate, seeming to have pulled himself together.

“It’s a matter of personal preference, but unfortunately, Kyoto’s ‘three great gates’ are at Nanzen-ji, Chion-in, and Higashi Hongan-ji. Tofuku-ji’s isn’t one of them.”

“For real?” Akihito asked, surprised.

“Wow.” I was also impressed.

“However, as with all things, you should decide with your own heart. Instead of ranking one above the other, I think they both have their merits.” Holmes placed his hand on his chest and smiled gently.

I was touched by his words. It’s true that social standings and popularity exist, but everything comes down to your own preferences. Just like he said, I’ve seen a lot of shrines and temples now, but I never thought to rank them. They were each amazing in their own ways.

“I see. It’s like that with women too, right?” Akihito said. “You have your own preferences, but they’re all good in their own ways.” He nodded.

I didn’t know what to say. *Geez, this guy...*

“Now then, let’s continue,” Holmes said, ignoring him and starting to walk.

“Okay,” I said, giggling and hurrying after him.

“Hey, wait for me!” Akihito frantically ran to catch up with us.

We headed towards the main building.

“Tofuku-ji Temple was founded by Michiie Kujo. He wanted it to be as large as Todai-ji Temple and as magnificent as Kofuku-ji Temple, both of which are in Nara City. Thus, he combined the two names into Tofuku-ji. The temple has suffered many fires, but as you can see, it’s been restored. You could say that it’s loved by the people.”

While listening to Holmes’s explanation, I made a praying motion to the beautiful golden statues of the Gautama triad and gazed up at the dragon painting on the ceiling. Then, we headed to the temple’s main attraction: the Tsuten bridge.

“I’ve been looking forward to Tsuten-*bashi*,” Akihito said excitedly, holding a brochure.

“It’s pronounced Tsuten-*kyo*. Please be careful when you’re talking about it on TV,” Holmes snapped.

Since it was autumn, quite a few people were there to see the colorful leaves. To be honest, I wasn’t anticipating much when I stepped onto the bridge.

The elegant wooden roofed corridor crossed a valley and was higher up than I

expected. It was like a midair observation deck that passed right through the fall foliage. A path surrounded by vivid red. The beauty rendered me speechless.

Red leaves floated on the river far below us. It felt like I was witnessing a marvel of nature. *Red leaves floating on a river... Oh, now I remember. This temple was an important place for Izumi and Holmes.* Izumi had been moved by the beauty of the red leaves floating down the river, and she recited the first part of “Chihayaburu” by Ariwara no Narihira: “Even in the ages of gods and miracles, I have never heard of the Tatsuta River...” She forgot the rest of the poem, and Holmes finished it for her: “The Tatsuta River’s waters dyed in such crimson.” *Yeah, that would make anyone fall in love.* Having someone like Holmes complete her poem in such a lovely place would’ve been like an arrow through her heart.

“Even in the ages of gods and miracles, I have never heard of the Tatsuta River’s waters dyed in such crimson...” I murmured, looking down at the river dyed red from the fallen leaves.

“Ariwara no Narihira, I see,” came Holmes’s gentle voice from behind me.

I flinched. Ariwara no Narihira wasn’t the issue here... This was the poem that brought Holmes and Izumi together. I accidentally said it out loud when I remembered that, and he just had to hear me. *Knowing him, he realized that I said it because of Izumi, right? Oh no, this might get awkward.*

“U-Umm, sorry. I just happened to remember,” I admitted, shrugging.

Holmes chuckled. “It’s all right. Thank you for your concern.”

Oh right, it happened a long time ago for him. Maybe I didn’t need to be nervous.

“There’s a poem of Ariwara no Narihira’s that I like more,” he continued.

“Huh?” I was surprised by his nonchalant response.

“It goes, *Through you, I learned and I wonder: doth the people of this world call this ‘love’?*”

Even I can interpret something like that. Let’s see... “I learned this feeling because of you. Is this what people call ‘love’?” It’s a heart-fluttering love poem.

“You like that poem?” I looked at him, surprised. I hadn’t expected that.

Holmes gave a small nod. “Yes, I admire it. I’d like to experience such feelings one day, too...but I’m sure it’s not possible,” he whispered to himself, gazing into the distance with his right hand on the railing. There was sorrow in his eyes.

My heart stung when I looked at him. *I think I understand now. He might’ve put his feelings for Izumi behind him, but he still remains traumatized by her betrayal.* For Holmes, who has the ability to see into people’s minds, it must’ve been shocking to witness his girlfriend being swayed and then taken away by another man. After all, he said that he was so shocked, envious, and frustrated that he considered going to Mount Kurama and becoming a priest. It must’ve destroyed his self-esteem. And now...he might be rejecting the idea of love.

“I think I understand,” I said.

“What?”

“I’ve...gotten over Katsumi, but I think the scars are still there. I feel too cowardly to fall in love again.” Thanks to what Holmes said, I finally understood myself. Even if things happened that made my heart skip a beat, there was a barrier in place that prevented my feelings from going further. *It’s because I don’t want to be hurt again.* “I hope our wounds will heal.” Our gazes met, and his eyes widened in surprise.

“Indeed...” he murmured softly. The pain in his voice made my heart ache. The two of us silently continued to look down at the bright red leaves floating down the river. *It must be the beautiful scenery that’s making my eyes well up.*

“Oh, Aoi, did the autumn leaves move you to tears?” Akihito said cheerily, walking up to us.

I hurried to wipe my tears. “Y-Yes. The scenery was so breathtaking... I was thinking that if any of my friends visit Kyoto in autumn, I’ll make sure to tell them to see Tofuku-ji Temple,” I said earnestly.

Akihito folded his arms. “I see,” he said, seeming impressed. ““If any of your friends visit Kyoto in autumn, make sure to tell them to see Tofuku-ji Temple,”

huh? I like that. Can I use it?"

"Huh? Um, sure?"

As soon as I nodded, Akihito took his phone out of his pocket and wrote the sentence down. *I guess he's going to use it during the filming. Despite what we say about him, he is an enthusiastic worker. I can tell that he's betting on this job.*

After enjoying the view from the Tsuten bridge for a while, we went to see the head priest's rock garden and then left the temple.

3

Akihito's aunt's house was only a few minutes' walk from Tofuku-ji Temple.

"Come to think of it, I haven't been to my aunt's place since I was a kid," Akihito said quietly as we walked.

"What's it like?" I asked.

"It's a Western-style house."

"Like Holmes's?"

"It's not that crazy. It's a normal, cozy little house. It's just around that corner."

We turned the corner, and I was stunned when I saw the house. Size-wise it was "cozy," but the exterior was covered in ivy to the point where you could barely see the walls. *There's no way this is "normal."*

"Umm, Akihito, it's that house, right?"

"Y-Yeah, probably. Holmes's car is there." Indeed, the Yagashira family's Jaguar was parked in front of it.

"'Probably'? It's your own aunt's house, right?" I tilted my head.

Akihito's face stiffened. "Uh, there wasn't that much ivy before, so it seriously threw me off. I bet the kids in the neighborhood think it's haunted."

"It has a nice charm to it," Holmes said. "The ivy prevents the walls from

receiving direct sunlight, so it'll be less hot inside in the summer." He took the house key out of his inner pocket. It was the one he'd received from Akihito's aunt beforehand.

"Um, does this house still have working gas and water?" I asked.

"Yes. It was lived in up until ten days ago, and there are still things to be moved. The gas and water will be running for the rest of the month," Holmes answered as the door opened with a *click*.

The rather wide entrance area was dim, so I couldn't see inside. Holmes quickly switched on the breaker near the ceiling. The foyer lit up, immediately revealing a row of three antique dolls on the shoe rack.

"Oh! That surprised me."

"Y-Yeah, me too. Dolls, huh?"

"Ah, Jumeau bisque dolls."

The dolls had porcelain skin, blonde hair, blue eyes, and bright red dresses. Holmes quickly put on a pair of black gloves. I could tell from the eagerness in his voice that he was excited.

"Jumeau?"

"A famous French atelier. I was surprised that they'd leave these right by the front door, but they're in very good condition and have been treated well." He took a notebook out of his pocket and started taking notes. He was probably writing down the prices that Akihito's aunt would get for them. I took a peek and was shocked to see that he'd written: "Bisque doll at entrance, red dress: ¥1,500,000."

"O-One-point-five million?"

"Yes. It appears to have been created in the late 1850s."

"A-Are the other two also worth that much?" Akihito asked, leaning in excitedly.

Holmes shook his head. "No, the two beside it are replicas. Thirty thousand for both of them, perhaps."

“Aw, so only one of them was worth a fortune.”

“That said, there seem to be more treasures hidden away here than I’d anticipated.” Holmes looked into the house from the foyer, his eyes gleaming enthusiastically.

Indeed, the house was crammed with old-looking things. The walls were covered in paintings, a porcelain flower vase sat atop an antique chest, and a small chandelier hung from the ceiling. It felt like the house belonged to the antiques now that the homeowner was no longer present.

“I’ll be appraising every last thing, so you two should tidy up the place to make it more comfortable,” Holmes declared.

“Okay!” Akihito and I answered in unison. That said, the house wasn’t messy; it just had a lot of things in it. *Is it time for my specialty, dusting?*

First, I opened the living room window to let in some fresh air. There was a garden outside—not big, but sizable enough that you could grow some vegetables.

Ahh, a garden. How nice. We lived in an apartment when we were in Saitama, and our current house can barely fit a parking space in front, so we’ve never had a garden. I’m not going to be envious of the ivy-covered walls because they look difficult to maintain, but it’d be nice to live in a house this size with a garden like this. It’s small, but it’d be like my own little castle. If I get married one day, I want to live in a house like this... The moment I thought that, Holmes appeared in my mind. I shook my head.

“Hey, Holmes!” Akihito shouted. “You said to clean up the living room, but it’s already clean.”

“In that case, please weed the yard.”

“Wh-What? Why do I have to do that?”

“I received permission from the homeowner to have a barbeque in the yard tonight.” Holmes grinned, notebook in hand.

“Oh!” Akihito and I exclaimed.

“Seriously? Aw yeah, leave the yard to me!” Akihito sprang towards the front

door like a monkey. *He's probably too old to be frolicking like that, but I guess that's how he always is.*

"The barbeque supplies are in the car trunk, so please start setting up once you've taken care of the yard."

"Will do!"

I couldn't help but smile at how cute he was.

"Aoi, could you help me with appraising? There are more treasures than I thought."

"Ah, okay."

Holmes took a binder of lined paper out of his bag and handed it to me. "Sorry, but if you could take notes for me."

"No problem." I nodded and held my pen firmly.

"Now then, let's begin." Holmes, still wearing his gloves, touched an antique lamp on top of a chest. "This is the work of the Muller brothers, who were French glassmakers. It uses many layers of glass to form the gradation in color, and the bronze pedestal is wonderfully designed as well," Holmes explained passionately.

I stared intently at the lily-shaped lamp. "It's beautiful," I said, my vocabulary as lacking as always. It was my honest opinion, though. It looked like a lamp you'd find in an elegant French hotel.

"Could you please write 'Antique lamp, Muller, three hundred thousand'?"

"O-Okay." *Th-Three hundred thousand. I've somewhat gotten used to these numbers, but it's still surprising.*

"The lamp beside it is also beautiful, but it's a modern work, so it doesn't have any value as an antique. I don't think that Akihito's uncle was solely interested in collecting valuable antiques—instead, he collected works that he was drawn to. I think that's a wonderful thing."

It's like we were saying earlier about temples and shrines: society places value on titles and standings, and people tend to think that expensive things are better. But I think it's great to be able to obtain what appeals to you rather than

being swayed by those considerations.

“Kura has a lot of East Asian antiques, so it feels kind of new seeing you appraise Western ones.”

“Indeed. Thanks to the owner’s preferences, I can’t call myself an expert on Western antiques.”

“Oh, really?”

“Yes,” Holmes said, picking up a small object. “Western paintings are particularly difficult for me.”

“I didn’t know there were areas you struggled in,” I said bluntly.

“Of course. For three-dimensional works like vases and tea bowls, it’s easy to identify counterfeits because the deceitful lines are easy to spot. As for two-dimensional works, I grew up seeing genuine Japanese paintings and calligraphy, so I’m capable of sniffing out copies of those to some extent. But when it comes to Western paintings, not only am I lacking in experience, but the enemies are quite formidable. Back then...if Ensho had challenged me with a Western painting, I don’t know if I would’ve seen through it,” he murmured to himself.

My heart leapt. I’d heard about Ensho, the master counterfeiter they encountered at Nanzen-ji Temple. He was definitely going to challenge Holmes again.

“I need to study harder,” Holmes said quietly.

I didn’t know what to say. His voice was calm yet intense. I could tell that he didn’t want to lose to that counterfeiter, no matter what.

“By the way, Aoi...”

“Yes?”

“Do I look like a ‘sheltered boy’ to you?” he asked, his expression serious.

“What?” I squeaked. I never would’ve expected that question.

“Pfft!” came a voice from outside. Akihito, who was mowing the lawn, must’ve heard our conversation.

“Never mind. Next is a Copenhagen ornament...”

“Ah, okay.” *What was that about?*

4

A small rectangular charcoal grill had been set up in the tidied-up yard. The flames crackled loudly. Above us, the autumn sky had become completely dark. The yard was lit up by a lantern that Holmes had brought. I sat on a camping chair and excitedly accepted the juice that was offered to me.

Akihito opened a can of beer, laughed, and pointed at Holmes. “Man, Holmes. You’re still bothered by what the assistant head priest said to you?”

“Please refrain from pointing fingers at people.” Expression unchanging, Holmes carefully took meat out of a storage container and placed it on the grill. He’d brought five containers in all: Wagyu beef, Iberico pork, chicken marinated in herbs, vegetables, and lastly...

“I also made rice balls, if you’re interested.” Holmes held up the container with a smile. His perfect form made my face stiffen.

“You’ve got a girly side, huh?” Akihito said quietly. To be honest, I completely agreed.

“I’m not a girl, though.”

“Right, you’re a sheltered boy. Hahaha!”

Holmes openly frowned, which was a rare sight. *Well, it might be pretty common when Akihito’s involved.*

“Um, what’s all this about being a sheltered boy?” I tilted my head.

“I’m glad you asked, Aoi!” Akihito leaned in more than necessary. “The other day at Nanzen-ji Temple, this guy was about to chase after the counterfeiter, but the assistant head priest said, ‘A sheltered boy isn’t going to be able to catch him.’ I still crack up every time I remember that uncomfortable smile he had on his face.” Akihito chuckled.

Holmes sighed, seeming honestly annoyed. “Yes, it was very unpleasant. My

grandfather is self-centered, and my father is nice but marches to his own beat. I have to take care of them and their houses, manage the store, sometimes I'm a cook, a driver, a baggage handler, a bodyguard, a translator, a butler... You'll not find any sheltered boy like this," he said, reverting to his Kyoto accent at the end. The sizzling meat started to char.

Akihito and I went pale. I held up my hands in an attempt to calm him down. "I-It's okay. The assistant head priest doesn't know how much you've been through."

"No, I do understand. Compared to Ensho, I'm sheltered. I'm just frustrated that he was able to determine that."

Holmes must've thought about a lot since meeting Ensho. Even though Ensho won the battle, that victory might've been more dangerous than we'd thought.

"What kind of life did Ensho lead?" I asked.

"Hmm... At a glance, his mouth was raised to the left, which is a common trait in people with emotional instability and drastic mood swings. However, he looked me straight in the eye and spoke without hesitation, so I knew he had self-confidence. I believe that his emotional instability comes from his early childhood, and his self-confidence comes from his own talent.

"Then there was his skill at imitation. It could be that he's always been conscious of what others think. Based on that, I think he likely had to make use of his talent to get through an unfortunate childhood," Holmes said smoothly. "It's hard to imagine an ordinary person suddenly taking up counterfeiting, so I believe that one of his close relatives...perhaps his father, was a painter. That would've led to Ensho taking up art as well. Then, his father would've noticed his son's talent and encouraged him to make forgeries. However, considering that Ensho took up priesthood after mastering his counterfeiting, he may no longer have any relatives he can depend on. Or perhaps he broke ties with them..."

Akihito and I were stunned. As always, he was too incredible.

"Is something the matter?" Holmes looked at us quizzically.

"Nah, I was just thinking that you really are 'Holmes,'" Akihito said,

dumbfounded.

I couldn't help but laugh and say, "Yeah."

5

After that, we stuffed our faces with rice balls, ate delicious grilled meat, and chatted around the fire. It was a lot of fun.

At 8:50 p.m., we excitedly gathered in front of the TV. We'd finished cleaning up, and Akihito's program about Kyoto was going to start at 8:55. I sat on the floor with my knees up, the way you would in gym class. My heart was beating fast as I watched the commercials. *Even though it's not me, I'm really excited!* It was going to be my first time seeing someone I know on TV.

"I-I'm kind of nervous."

"D-Don't be silly. *I'm* the nervous one here," Akihito said, whirling around to face me. I flinched.

Holmes chuckled and said, "But it's not your first time appearing on TV, right?"

"It's not, but before it was always a quick glance. This is my first time being the main focus."

Then, the screen changed to a view of autumn foliage with music playing in the background.

"Classical music arranged in jazz style. Very nice," commented Holmes.

"R-Right?" Akihito seemed proud, but his response was awkward because of his nervousness.

As the familiar-sounding music played, the camera slowly panned from the beautiful red leaves to Nanzen-ji Temple's Sanmon gate. Akihito stood in front of the gate, wearing a dark gray kimono. The kimono was very chic, making him look even more attractive and removing any sense of his frivolousness.

"W-Wow, a kimono! It really suits you, Akihito!" I exclaimed.

Akihito gave an embarrassed laugh. "W-Well, it was the first episode, after all.

I had to look good.”

“Nanzen-ji Temple is the highest ranked of all of the Zen Buddhist temples in Japan. When I first saw this towering gate, I was overwhelmed by an indescribable aura. It’s even more exceptional in autumn. Look at these wonderful red leaves.”

There was a refined smile on Akihito’s face as he looked up at the foliage. Then he walked up to the balcony, and the screen was filled with red leaves and the city of Kyoto. It was presented beautifully—even an amateur like me could tell that the camerawork was great.

“Now, this Sanmon gate is known for being the location where Goemon Ishikawa says ‘A magnificent, magnificent view’ in a kabuki play. However, it was actually built after Goemon Ishikawa had already died. Nevertheless, the people of Kyoto must have been so fascinated by the view from here that they incorporated it into a play,” Akihito said passionately, gazing down at the landscape.

“As for the aqueduct, which was a great accomplishment of the Meiji era...” Next, he talked about the beauty of the aqueduct.

And finally... *“Nanzen-ji Temple was also known for once being haunted. The emperor at the time was at a loss. He asked Fumon Mukan, a Zen priest from Tofuku-ji Temple, to drive the ghosts away somehow. It is said that even though the priest merely did the same things he did regularly at Tofuku-ji Temple, the ghosts disappeared. The priest said that ghosts cannot win against virtue, and evidently that was the case. Next time, I’d like to introduce you to Tofuku-ji Temple.”* Akihito smiled as the camera zoomed out with the music playing in the background. The program came to an end.

The footage was so beautiful that it touched my heart, and Akihito did a really good job of making me want to go there. *But...he was totally imitating Holmes, right?*

A commercial came on, and we automatically looked at each other.

“Akihito, you were totally imitating Holmes, right?”

“Akihito, if you misrepresent yourself to that extent, you’re going to have a difficult time in the future.”

“N-No I won’t! I’m an actor performing my role on the show!”

“An actor performing his role... That’s a good way to put it.” Holmes chuckled, smiling knowingly.

“Why don’t you go on the show, Holmes? You’re just as good-looking as Akihito.”

“H-Hey, Aoi!”

“No, I’m not interested in television work. After my grandfather’s clash with that business, I decided that I wasn’t suited for the world of show biz. I don’t like to be in a public-facing position.”

I see. Since he’s so perceptive, he might’ve instantly realized that he wasn’t suited for TV after experiencing it through the owner.

“Ahhh, since I was so nervous, now I gotta go pee. I’m going to the bathroom.” Akihito stretched and left the living room.

“Gotta go pee”... So much for being an attractive actor.

Some time after Akihito had left, the lights suddenly went out.

“Huh?” It wasn’t just dark. It was pitch black, possibly because of the light-blocking curtains.

“It looks like the power went out,” Holmes said calmly in the darkness.

“R-Really? Did we use that much electricity?”

“I’m not sure. It’s a good thing we have the lantern that we used for the barbeque.” Holmes picked up the battery-powered lantern from the floor and switched it on.

“Gyaaaaaaaaaaaaah!” Suddenly, a piercing scream came from the hallway—more importantly, it was Akihito’s voice. The living room door opened with a *bang*.

“W-We’ve got a problem!” Akihito barged in, his eyes wide.

“You’re overreacting. It’s just a power outage,” I sighed, exasperated.

“I can imagine a sudden blackout being scary when you’re in the restroom of an unoccupied house, though.”

“N-No! That’s not it! After I left the bathroom, a doll came walking at me from the other end of the hallway, and it was laughing,” Akihito said, sounding like he was struggling to breathe.

I froze. “A-A doll?” Holmes and I exchanged glances.

“When you’re paranoid, even a willow tree will look like a ghost. I’m sure that your fear from the blackout made you think you were seeing the doll walking and laughing,” Holmes said.

“N-No way! This is completely different from a tree looking like a ghost! Go and see for yourself!”

“If anything, I’ll check later when I do need to use the restroom.”

“Seriously, what the heck was that? I need to know!”

“Like I said, I’ll check later.”

“No, please do it now. I’m begging you, Holmes. Zen priest Holmes!” Akihito knelt on the floor and clapped his hands together, trying to get Holmes’s attention.

“Sorry, I’m not a Zen priest; I’m a sheltered boy,” Holmes said with a smile. He was always more open with his black-hearted, “wicked Kyoto guy” side when it came to Akihito.

But now that it’s come to this... “U-Um... I need to use the restroom too...” I said quietly, looking down. *It’s really embarrassing, but I’m scared to go alone now.*

“All right,” Holmes said. “I’ll take a look then. You stay here, Akihito.” He picked up the lantern and stood up.

“Wait, you’re taking the light with you?” Akihito asked.

“Of course. I’m also going to check the breaker, so please wait here.”

“O-Okay.”

“Don’t worry, Akihito. There’s nothing to be scared of.” Holmes patted him on

the back a few times.

“Y-Yeah.” Akihito looked really conflicted about Holmes’s mocking form of encouragement, and I couldn’t help but laugh.

“Now then, let’s go, Aoi.”

“O-Okay.”

I left the living room with Holmes. Moonlight shone in from the hallway window, so it was brighter there, much to my relief.

Holmes checked the breaker in the foyer and said, “The breaker is fine. Perhaps it’s an issue with the wiring.”

“I see...” I looked towards the other end of the hallway and flinched when I saw a doll. “H-Holmes, the doll is there!” *Maybe Akihito was right!*

Holmes silently picked up the doll. It was a boy with the face of Fukusuke, a traditional china doll associated with good luck.

“Ah, this is a mechanical doll.”

“M-Mechanical?”

“Yes, so there’s nothing strange about it moving. There’s nothing to be afraid of, so take your time. I’ll wait right here.” He smiled gently.

Okay, so there’s nothing wrong with a mechanical doll moving. But why did it suddenly start moving in the first place? I decided not to dwell on it.

“I-I’ll go now, then. Sorry.” I bowed and was about to go into the restroom when Holmes said, “Take this. It’s scary when it’s dark, right?” and offered me the lantern.

“Th-Thank you.” *Holmes really is nice.*

Still nervous, I used the restroom, washed my hands, and came back out.

“Sorry and thanks again,” I said.

“Let’s go back.”

The moment I passed the lantern to Holmes—

“Gyaaaaaaaaaaaaah!” Akihito’s scream rang out again. *Did something else*

happen?

I stiffened up. "Holmes..."

"Really, that man... He might be suited for a suspense drama," Holmes said, exasperated. I relaxed a bit hearing him say that, feeling the fear subside.

"What happened, Akihito?" Holmes opened the living room door. Inside, Akihito was clinging to a big stuffed animal. "Really, what on earth happened to you?"

"Th-There was...a white silhouette of a woman! It showed up for a second and then disappeared," Akihito wailed.

"Wh-What? Really?" I asked.

"Yeah! It happened after you two left!"

Hm? Something felt off, but before I could figure out what, the sound of noisy footsteps came from the second floor. Akihito screamed again, and I froze in place. Wh-Why are there footsteps coming from the empty second floor? This place really is haunted!

"It's okay. Don't be scared," Holmes whispered in my ear before the fear could set in. My heart skipped a beat.

Wait, huh? Something's definitely not right.

"Th-This is weird," I said. The other two looked at me, surprised.

"I-I know it's weird! This place is swarming with evil spirits!" Akihito exclaimed.

"N-No, that's not what I mean. After your show ended and you went to the bathroom, the power suddenly went out and a mechanical doll started moving once you went into the hallway... Then, when Holmes and I were in the hallway, a white silhouette appeared in the living room..." *It's almost as though they were trying to spook Akihito without letting me see anything scary.* "I don't think this is the work of spirits."

"Wh-What is it, then?!" Akihito raised his voice, clearly panicking.

There's...only one person who could do this.

I gulped and turned around to look at Holmes.

“Holmes, this was your doing, right?” I declared.

The living room fell silent for some time.

Akihito was the first to speak: “Wh-What are you talking about, Aoi? How could Holmes make spirits show up?”

“I-I don’t know, but it wouldn’t be impossible for him.”

I stared fixedly at Holmes. He looked calm, and I couldn’t tell what he was thinking from his expression. *He received the house key in advance, so he could’ve come here beforehand...and most importantly, he made it so that I wouldn’t see any of the ghosts. That way, I wouldn’t get scared...*

“But why would he do that?!” Akihito lamented.

Right... Why would he do that?

Then, Holmes chuckled and clapped his hands. “Well done, Aoi. I slipped up at the end there. Rather, it’s hard for me to be ruthless when there’s a girl present, so my cover was blown.”

As I thought, the supernatural incidents were Holmes’s doing.

“S-Seriously, Holmes? Why would you do this? Do you hate me that much?” Akihito asked with tears in his eyes. I felt so bad for him.

“No, not at all. If I hated you and wanted to make you suffer, I wouldn’t use such a bothersome method. I’d find an easier, crueller, more brutal way,” Holmes said, nonchalantly mixing in those mean words. “What happened tonight was my doing, but I’m not the main culprit.”

He did it but he wasn’t the main culprit? “Huh? Does that mean there’s a mastermind?” I asked.

“Yes. Someone asked me to do this.”

Someone asked him...? Suddenly, I remembered the phone call he received at Kura. The person on the other end also said they’d call him again later...

“Is the mastermind Akihito’s manager?” I asked quietly.

Holmes nodded. “Correct. That day, he said to me, ‘Akihito was great in that

program, but he was trying too hard to imitate someone, and none of his own personality came through. I do think it was a good fit for that episode, though. That said, it's definitely going to be a problem down the road if the viewers are under the impression that Akihito is such a well-behaved man. So, I want to show the viewers his true self. I'm going to show them what that elegant Akihito Kajiwarra is really like, and I could use your help.'"

Akihito and I gulped. So that was the truth.

"Wait, but...does that mean..."

"No way, right?"

We inadvertently looked around the room.

"Correct: this is a TV prank. By the way, he said it'll be aired as a New Year's special. Oh, and don't worry, Aoi. Our faces will be hidden," Holmes said nonchalantly.

Akihito and I gaped.

"Wh-What? Does that mean they're going to show me being humiliated?"

Holmes nodded. "Yes. Those screams were quite impressive, so it might lead to more work."

"Are the staff waiting around somewhere?" I asked, quickly looking around the room.

"No, he said they couldn't spend that much money on a beginner like Akihito. There are only hidden cameras and the tricks I set up in advance. I was the one operating them."

"H-Hmph." Akihito looked unhappy to be told that they "couldn't spend that much money" on him, but he also seemed relieved. He plopped himself down on the sofa. "Thank god that's over, though. You're not gonna pull anything else now that the cat's out of the bag, right?"

"Yes. I had more prepared, like a doll falling from the ceiling and a child's crying voice, but unfortunately, now that it's been spoiled, the fun's over. I did get some great reactions out of you though, so I think your manager will be satisfied. You have a good partner." Holmes smiled warmly.

“I-I guess.”

Then, the gonging sound of a bell rang out, making us flinch.

“Dude, stop it with the tricks!”

“Yeah!”

Holmes shook his head. “No, that wasn’t me.”

“H-Huh?” Akihito and I reacted in unison.

“That was Tofuku-ji Temple’s late-night ‘sending’ bell,” Holmes said with a smile.

“Sending bell?”

“Yes. It rings eighteen times every night at 11:45 p.m.”

“Th-This late at night?”

“Yes. The late-night bell has been a tradition since the temple’s founding. The head priest at the time, Enni, was also the head priest of Kennin-ji Temple, so he would go to Kennin-ji when he finished his business at Tofuku-ji. When that happened, Tofuku-ji would send him off with the ‘sending’ bell, and Kennin-ji would welcome him with the ‘receiving’ bell. It’s been seven hundred and fifty years since then, and the tradition is still kept alive.”

The gonging continued. I couldn’t believe that they’d ring a bell in the middle of the night when it wasn’t New Year’s Eve. And it was *every* night... But then again, this local tradition has continued for seven hundred and fifty years. I was impressed that Kyoto was able to protect it for so long, and I hoped they’d continue to do so. I felt unexpectedly moved when I encountered these local customs.

“Now then, my mission is over, so let’s have another toast to Akihito’s future success.” Using the light from the lantern, Holmes poured wine and juice into our glasses.

“Y-Yes, let’s.”

“Yeah, sounds good.”

The three of us raised our glasses. “To Akihito’s success! Cheers!”

We toasted as the bell rang out. The chimes being sent from Tofuku-ji to Kennin-ji felt like they were symbolizing Akihito's journey into another world. The bell stopped after exactly eighteen chimes.

The three of us exchanged glances and laughed.

"Man, that was really scary, right, Aoi?" Akihito said, taking a swig of his wine.

"Yes." I nodded. "The footsteps upstairs scared me a lot. After we found out the truth, I thought there were staff on the second floor."

"Ah," Holmes said, looking at me. "I actually didn't set up the footsteps upstairs."

"Huh?"

"It's possible that I upset some apparitions with my man-made phantoms."

"Wh-What?"

"Well, when Tofuku-ji Temple's former head priest Fumon Mukan drove away the ghosts at Nanzen-ji Temple, he said that 'ghosts cannot win against virtue.' So, as long as you keep that in mind, you should be fine." Holmes grinned, placing his hand on his chest.

Akihito and I looked at each other and screamed, "Gyaaaaaaaaaaaaah!"

I'll never forget this long autumn night.

Final Chapter: Confusion and Enlightenment

“We should all realize that we can only talk about the bad forgeries, the ones that have been detected; the good ones are still hanging on the walls.” —
Théodore Rousseau

1

It's late October now, and we're approaching the height of autumn. At the antique shop Kura, quiet jazz music was playing as usual. They call autumn the best season for enjoying art. *Come to think of it, autumn suits Kura well.*

As for me, my friends seemed kind of restless with winter coming up. It was going to be jam-packed with events. I sighed dejectedly, thinking back to my classmates' invitation.

“Is something wrong?” Holmes looked up from the accounting book, sounding concerned.

“Ah, no. Um...Holmes, have you ever been to a mixer?”

“What?” Holmes widened his eyes, bewildered by my abrupt question. He quickly put on his usual smile and said, “I've been a university student for five years now, so yes, I have. Were you invited to one by any chance?”

“Yes, my friends at school insisted. The guys are apparently in university, and they needed to match the number of people on each side.”

“University...” Holmes's eyebrow twitched. “Are university students supposed to want to go to a mixer with high school students?”

Right; there are lots of beautiful women at universities, so wouldn't they think that high school students are childish?

“Well, I suppose there are those who prefer naïve girls,” he continued. “However, if they're going out of their way to have a mixer with high school girls, I'd imagine they're all the type who won't hold back just because you're in

high school. Please be careful,” Holmes said, coldly and bluntly.

I was a bit surprised. It was rare for him to speak that way. *He must be really worried about me.* I couldn’t help but giggle, though.

“What was funny about what I said?” Holmes asked.

“You’re worried about a plain high school girl like me, when I’m only there to make the others look better. No one’s going to go after me when the girls who invited me are all glamorous,” I said, laughing.

Holmes gave a small sigh. “I see. Obliviousness is both an asset and a sin.”

“What?”

“Never mind, sorry. That was a bad way to put it.” Holmes brushed his hand through his hair, apparently reflecting on what he said.

“It’s okay. Thank you for worrying, but I’ll be fine.”

“Will you?” He rested his chin in his hands, looking conflicted.

He has a point, though. University students who want to have a mixer with high school girls might think we’re easy. Maybe a plain girl like me has to be even more careful. I wasn’t interested in the first place, so I guess I should just decline the invitation. I nodded, having made my decision.

Meanwhile, Holmes was holding something that looked like a card and looking at it with a sorrowful expression.

“What’s that?” I asked, walking closer to him.

Holmes looked up at me and said, “Ah, this is—”

Suddenly, the door opened and the chime rang.

“Hey there, Holmes and Aoi!” Akihito barged in, grinning from ear to ear.

“You again? Also, could you enter the store more quietly?” Holmes said, slightly exasperated.

Akihito ignored him, sat down on the sofa, and said, “So, Holmes...”

It was hard not to laugh at how blatantly irritated Holmes was. Those two made a good pair.

“What now?”

“Do you know about Suzumushi Temple?” Akihito’s eyes lit up.

“Suzumushi Temple?” I tilted my head. *Suzumushi* are bell crickets, and people like to keep them as pets. *Is there really a temple with a cute name like that?*

“Yes,” Holmes said, beginning his usual explanation. “It’s commonly called Suzumushi Temple because you can enjoy the crickets’ song there all year round, but its official name is Kagon Temple. It’s known for the ‘one wish’ Jizo statue.”

“One wish?” I tilted my head again.

Holmes nodded. “The temple is famous for being able to grant each person a single wish.”

“Just one?” I asked, intrigued.

Akihito leaned forward enthusiastically. “Have you been there before?”

“I went with my friends in middle school,” Holmes answered.

“Did your wish come true?”

Holmes paused, as if recalling his wish. “Yes, I got into the high school I was aiming for.”

“So it did! What an awesome temple.” Akihito clenched his fists.

Isn’t Holmes smart enough to get into his desired high school without asking the great Jizo for help? I thought to myself.

“Is that what you came to ask?”

“Let’s go to Suzumushi Temple, Holmes! I want my dream to come true,” Akihito said, his eyes sparkling.

Holmes frowned, looking uninterested. “If that’s all, then why don’t you go by yourself?”

“Aw, don’t you have any other wishes? Let’s go, dude! Hey, Aoi, you wanna go too, right? Aren’t you interested in a temple that can grant you any one wish?”

I was startled by the sudden question, but I nodded firmly. “Y-Yes!” I couldn’t think of a wish at the moment, but I was interested anyway.

Holmes sighed, having apparently resigned himself. “If Aoi says she wants to go, then let’s go. Is next Sunday all right?”

“That soon? And you’re suggesting a specific day? Do you already have plans again?” Akihito hurried to take his phone out and check his schedule.

“Yes, I happen to have something to attend to in the afternoon in Arashiyama.”

“What is it?” I asked.

“This,” Holmes said, showing me the card he’d been holding. It seemed to be an invitation. It said “Shigetoshi Yanagihara’s Birthday Celebration” on it.

“Shigetoshi Yanagihara... Is that the appraiser?” He was a famous appraiser as well as an old friend of the owner’s. He also came to the owner’s birthday party.

“Yes. He’ll be holding a party for his eightieth birthday. My grandfather will be away on business in China, so I’ll have to attend in his place.” Holmes shrugged. He didn’t seem enthusiastic about it... *Well, of course he isn’t.*

“The party starts at 2:00 p.m., so we’ll go to Suzumushi Temple first thing in the morning, do some sightseeing in Arashiyama, and then go to the party together,” Holmes said with a grin.

“What?! The owner’s party was fine, but why would I want to go to another old man’s birthday party?! You’re just dragging us along because you’ll be bored by yourself!” Akihito exclaimed. *He’s as straightforward as always.*

“Yanagihara lives in a magnificent Japanese-style estate near Tenryu-ji Temple. Since he’s a well-known appraiser too, I’m sure there will be famous people from various fields there.”

“Oh. Well, I guess I don’t mind going if that’s the case.”

“Why do you act like you’re doing me a favor when you’re the one that came to me for help? If you can’t come, that’s perfectly fine with me,” Holmes scoffed.

“Wait, um, please let me come, Zen priest Holmes.” Panicking, Akihito put his

hands together in a praying pose. I couldn't help but laugh at the two and their usual antics.

Now Akihito said, "Phew, I'm glad I happen to have Sunday off for once. Work's been really tight lately. I have a meeting now, so I gotta run." He dashed out of the store. Apparently that request was the only thing he came for.

"He left before I could even bring out the coffee," Holmes remarked with a wry smile, shrugging.

"Yeah," I said.

"Since I'm already making it, let's take a break anyway."

"Okay."

We sat across the counter from each other. I took a sip of the café au lait that he'd brewed for me. In front of me, Holmes was elegantly drinking his coffee. I inadvertently found myself observing him. *Long fingers, and his eyelashes are pretty long too...*

"Is something wrong?" Holmes asked, noticing my gaze and looking up at me.

Flustered, I scrambled to say, "A-Akihito seems like he's doing really well, huh? It looked like he was busy with work." *He said that his schedule was tight.*

"No, if he was really doing that well, he wouldn't make an effort to show off his 'busyness.' Things are looking better for him, but he's still in a precarious situation, and he's hopelessly worried about the future. I think that's why he wanted to ask me to go to Suzumushi Temple with him," Holmes explained calmly. *Wow, I don't know what to say. He's as sharp as ever.*

"Is Suzumushi Temple famous? I didn't know about it at all."

"Perhaps it's only well-known among those in the know."

"You went there in middle school, right?"

"Yes."

"If you can only make one wish there, does that mean you've used up your only chance?" *Is that why he never went again after that?*

"It's not limited to once in your lifetime. At Suzumushi Temple, you buy a

talisman and make your wish to the Jizo statue. If your wish is granted, then you come back to give thanks and return the talisman. Then, you can buy another talisman and make a new wish. Many people do this. Come to think of it, I never went back to formally give my thanks, since I returned the talisman through the mail.”

“You’re allowed to mail it back?”

“Yes, since there are those who visit from afar. However, there are also many people from afar who come back multiple times.”

“That means their wishes are coming true, right? Wow, I’m looking forward to it now.” I glanced at Holmes, who looked as calm as always. “You didn’t seem enthusiastic about going, but don’t you have wishes you want granted? There has to be something, right?” I asked innocently.

Holmes furrowed his brow. “That’s the issue.”

“Huh?”

“Well, being limited to just one is the issue. I’m a greedy man, so I have lots of wishes. But there isn’t one that stands above the rest. I didn’t know what to pick when I was in middle school either, which is why I ended up with the safe choice of getting into my desired high school.”

“Oh, I see. It does seem like it could be hard to choose only one.” *Just one wish, huh? In that sense, Akihito’s lucky to have a clear wish. I’m sure he’ll ask to succeed in the entertainment industry. What would I wish for, then?* I pondered seriously.

“There *is* one wish that occupies most of my mind right now, but I don’t think it’s something I would ask the gods or the Buddha for,” said Holmes.

Surprised, I looked up. “What is it?”

“I want to defeat Ensho once and for all, but I don’t think I’d want to borrow the great Jizo’s power for that.”

“Oh, I see. You really hate to lose, huh?” I giggled.

Holmes smiled and nodded. “Yes. It rarely gets pointed out, but I’m very competitive.”

"I know. You're also stubborn but sincere. You have another face that's completely different from the one you usually show, but I think that side of you is also great," I said earnestly.

Holmes looked surprised.

"Oh, sorry," I said. "That was rude of me to say."

"No, it wasn't. Thank you."

"Huh?" *Why did he thank me?*

"As you said, I'm stubborn and hate to lose... I'm also a two-faced man. Setting aside my outward face, my hidden face isn't something that can be praised," he said quietly.

"To me, both of those sides are you."

Holmes didn't say anything and simply smiled in response.

2

Then it was Sunday. Holmes was driving us to Suzumushi Temple.

"We're going pretty early, huh?" I asked from the passenger seat. It was 8:00 a.m.

"Aoi, don't underestimate Suzumushi Temple," Holmes said in a low voice.

"Is it that popular?" Akihito asked, leaning forward from the backseat.

"Yes. You'd best stay away during Golden Week and other holidays, or else you'll have to wait three hours."

"Th-Three hours?" Akihito and I asked in unison.

"If you're going, then aim for a weekday during the off-season. Honestly, I didn't want to go on a Sunday during the peak of autumn. Since it's early in the morning, we might be okay."

"I-Is it that bad?" Akihito and I both asked, exchanging glances.

What does he mean by having to wait? Is it like when you go to a shrine on New Year's Eve? I tilted my head.

“But hey, that means it actually works, right?” Akihito grinned.

“Well, they say that fame begets reputation. The more people that gather, the stronger the shrine’s energy becomes,” Holmes said smoothly, nodding.

“All right! Akihito Kajiwarra, twenty-five years old, is gonna give it a shot!” Akihito clenched his fists.

“Hm?” Holmes squinted. “Akihito, you’re still twenty-five?”

“Yeah? What of it?” Akihito asked, confused.

“Since your name has the word for ‘autumn’ in it, I thought you would’ve been born in autumn.”

He has a point. We met Akihito in early July, and he was twenty-five then. Because of his name, I’d also assumed his birthday was in September or October.

“No, my birthday is June 30th,” Akihito answered bluntly.

“Huh?” I turned around. “B-But then why is your name ‘Akihito’?”

“Ah,” Holmes said, nodding as though he’d instantly figured it out. “Your life was conceived in autumn.”

“Yup. Apparently that’s when they made me.”

“I’d assumed it was a completely unoriginal name, but I suppose some sophistication did go into it.”

“I guess that was my dad’s style. I’m impressed you realized right away though, Holmes. I bet you’re a closet perv, thinking about that stuff.” Akihito grinned.

Holmes smiled back. “Could you not use such unpleasant language? I’ll have you know I’m a gentleman, unlike you, constantly spewing out sexual remarks like you’re some kind of animal.”

“That’s slander!”

“That’s my line.”

Sh-Should I laugh, or would that be a bad idea? Not knowing what face to

make, I sat there with a stiff face and flushed cheeks.

“Sorry, Aoi,” Holmes said. “We’re almost there.”

The car headed into Arashiyama. I saw a sign saying “Matsuno’o Taisha Shrine” and a large vermilion *torii* gate.

“This is my first time seeing Matsuno’o Taisha too,” I said. “It’s really nice, huh?” I pressed my face to the window as I looked outside.

Holmes nodded. “This is another high-ranking shrine with a long history.”

“How high?” Akihito asked.

“How high...? After the relocation of the capital, it and Kamo Shrine to the east were titled ‘Strict God of the East and Fierce Spirit of the West.’ It was considered the Imperial tutelary shrine of the west.”

“Huh, I should write this down.” Akihito took out his phone. “What’s the Kamo Shrine, by the way?”

“It’s the collective name for the Kamigamo Shrine and the Shimogamo Shrine.”

“Huh, I see. Okay so, after the relocation of the capital... Kamo shrine... Ugh, using my phone while we’re moving is making me carsick.” Akihito covered his mouth, his face pale.

Holmes and I wordlessly exchanged glances and laughed.

At last, we entered Suzumushi Temple’s parking lot.

“I’m glad there’s room,” Holmes said, seeming relieved. There were quite a few parking spaces available, but more than half of them were already taken.

We got out of the car. The path to the temple led deeper into the mountain. It was surrounded by colorful trees. After crossing a bridge over a small stream and walking a bit more, we saw a stone monument that said “Temple of the Bell Crickets” and a line of people that were taking up half of the stone staircase leading to the entrance. It was 8:35 a.m. and the temple wasn’t even open yet. *There are this many people lined up so early in the morning?*

“Ah, we’re lucky that it’s this empty. We might be able to squeeze into the first session,” Holmes said, sounding relieved again.

“Huh? This is considered empty?” Akihito grimaced. I was thinking the same thing.

“Yes. I hear that when it’s busy, the line extends past that stream, all the way to the parking lot.” Holmes pointed far in the distance.

Akihito and I gaped.

“S-So, what did you mean by ‘the first session’?” I asked.

“The head priest gives lectures in the reception hall. He tells a nice story and explains how the talisman wishes work. All in all, it’s a little under thirty minutes, I believe.”

“What, if we don’t listen to the story, we can’t buy the talismans?”

“Correct.”

“If the explanation is half an hour long, how many hours are we gonna have to wait? Can’t they just write that stuff in a brochure?!” Akihito complained loudly.

“Perhaps your wish won’t be granted that way? I wonder if the great Jizo heard your shouting just now.” Holmes looked up the stairs regretfully.

“Wait, I take that back. Please allow me to listen to the story. I humbly apologize, O great Jizo.” Akihito frantically put his hands together in prayer.

The people around us giggled.

“Hey, isn’t that the person from the Kyoto sightseeing show?” one of them whispered.

“Yeah right. He looks similar, but his aura’s completely different. The guy on TV looked calm and smart.”

“Yeah. Those two guys are cool though, right?”

Hmm, it really is him, though... It’s just that he copies Holmes when he’s on TV.

“Well, his true colors will be exposed soon,” Holmes said, making me laugh.

Right, that prank episode is going to be aired next month. He's acting well-mannered for now, but his true nature is going to be revealed to the whole country.

"Ahh, at this point, I wish it'd happen sooner. Even outside of the show, people are expecting someone like Holmes, and it's a real pain." Akihito's shoulders slumped.

"I told you it was going to be difficult later on."

"Sh-Shut up! Couldn't you have told me that *before* the filming?"

"I didn't think you were going to take the 'monkey see, monkey do' approach."

"D-Don't call it that!"

Thanks to their fun (for me at least) conversation, time passed fairly quickly. Before long, it was time for the temple to open. By then, there was already a long line snaking behind us. I realized that Holmes hadn't been exaggerating. *Suzumushi Temple really is this popular...*

Awed, I climbed the stairs. The Jizo statue was waiting for us at the top. It wore a red shawl and held something that looked like a staff. There was a fence in front of it preventing us from getting closer.

"That's the Jizo of Happiness. Let's wait until after the lecture to make our proper visit," Holmes said, making a praying motion at the statue. Akihito and I did the same before entering the temple grounds.

Inside, a priest guided us. "Good morning. Please come this way."

We paid the entrance fee, took off our shoes, and entered the building. We found ourselves in a large room with tatami flooring. The sounds of bell crickets chirping echoed throughout. There were glass tanks on one side of the hall, which seemed to be where the crickets were kept. There was also a row of long tables with teacups and teacakes on them.

"Please have a seat. Make sure to fill all of the spaces," a woman instructed.

The three of us sat down. Before long, the hall was filled with people and the sliding door was closed.

“Good morning, everyone,” greeted a smiling priest. “Please feel free to sit however you like.” After giving his introduction, he began to speak about Suzumushi Temple’s “happiness talismans” that can grant any wish. The talismans were rectangular and smaller than playing cards. They were yellow with red text saying “Happiness Talisman.”

“There is a manifestation of Jizo inside these,” the priest explained. “His head is right around where the character for ‘Happy’ is printed. So, when you go to his statue, hold the talisman like this, with the ‘Happy’ in front. Make sure to tell him your name, address, and a single wish. You don’t have to say them out loud, although you can if you want everyone to hear.

“As for why he needs your address, this Jizo is special. He wears sandals, you see. When you make a wish, he’ll visit you to grant it. So, he needs your address, but don’t worry—he doesn’t need your postal code,” the priest said lightheartedly. The audience laughed.

“Many people come to this temple to have their wishes granted. You’re welcome to wish for anything at all, but for example, if you want to get married, I would suggest saying, ‘Please allow me to form a connection with someone who is suitable for me.’ Saying you want to marry so-and-so idol isn’t possible because that person has their own circumstances. It’s important to ask for someone *suitable*.

“You also must not change your wish on a whim. It happens all the time; people coming to us and saying they want to cancel the wish they just made. It’s just not possible, so commit to your wish before making it.

“Also, for couples wishing for the treasure of children, you must both wish for the same thing. If the mother is praying ‘Please let us be blessed with a child’ with all her might, and the father is beside her praying ‘Please let me win the lottery next week,’ it just won’t work out.”

The priest’s witty speaking had the audience constantly laughing. I was surprised by how he skillfully used humor to make us remember the rules.

“Lastly, use your wish to bring happiness to yourself and others. Making a wish that tries to cause harm to another will erase all of the good karma you’ve earned through your struggles in life. Resentment, envy, and entrapment will

make you lose your own good fortune, so keep your wishes to those that will make you happy.”

I see...

“While we’re here, allow me to explain the difference between the two types of talismans, *omamori* and *ofuda*, since there seem to be quite a few people who don’t know. *Omamori*, which is what ours are, essentially protect a person, so keep it with you at all times. The prayer is only good for one year, so it loses effectiveness after that. When a year has passed, please return the talisman.

“*Ofuda* are placed in the house. They protect the home, so please place them facing the direction of the sunrise. However, you must not pierce them with a thumbtack, for that would be stabbing the god inside. Find a proper way to affix them. *Ofuda* are also generally effective for one year, but if it’s your unlucky year, you ought to keep them up until the end of the following year.”

I see, so talismans are only effective for one year. I feel like we still have some faded ones in our kitchen...

The priest’s lecture was intriguing, educational, and above all, entertaining. Time went by in a flash.

3

After the lecture, we left the hall and bought our talismans. Since they could be given as souvenirs, I saw some people buying several. Apparently for the souvenir ones, the purchaser goes to the Jizo statue first, holds all of them out, and prays “Please grant these people’s wishes as well.” Then, each receiver faces the direction of Kyoto, places their hands together, and says their name and address. And apparently, they don’t need to give their postal code.

Anyway, I only bought one for myself. Holmes and Akihito each bought one as well. We left the temple and walked down the path, looking around at the courtyard.

“I really enjoyed the priest’s lecture,” I said quietly, looking at the fall foliage. “I was surprised at how funny it was.”

Holmes nodded and replied, “I think it’s wonderful how he weaves meaning

into the humor.”

While Holmes and I spoke, Akihito walked silently in front of us. *Come to think of it, he hasn't said much since we left the temple. I wonder what's wrong?* I leaned forward to peer sideways at his face and noticed that his eyes were moist. *Huh? Is he...moved by the story?*

Holmes took a handkerchief from his inner pocket and walked forward to offer it to him. “Akihito, you can use this to wipe your tears.”

“I-I ain't crying!” Akihito rubbed his eyes with the end of his sleeve and whirled around to face us. Apparently he was embarrassed that we found out he was moved to tears.

“You were moved by the lecture, right?” Holmes asked. “There's no need to hide it. When your heart is touched, tears well up in your eyes. Your sensitivity is remarkable—no wonder you're an actor.”

“Sh-Shut up!” Akihito blushed furiously.

Holmes, who was still holding the handkerchief, smiled from ear to ear. *Holmes... He seems kind at first glance, but his wickedness is at full power.* Once again, the people around us giggled at the two.

After circling around the courtyard, we finally made it back to the Jizo statue with the sandals that was near the entrance. There were already many people holding out yellow talismans with both hands and praying, not to mention the crowd of people still waiting in line to get in.

Akihito gripped his talisman tightly and shouted loudly, “Akihito Kajiwara, twenty-five years old! Please grant me success in the entertainment industry!”

Holmes tapped him on the shoulder. “Akihito, you don't need to state your age. You *do* need to give your address, so say it in your heart.”

The people around us burst into laughter. I couldn't help but laugh with them.

Still, Akihito did wish for success in the entertainment industry. What about me? If I'm hesitating like this, will my wish even be granted?

“I'm going to wish for my grandfather to stay in good health for the next year,” Holmes said, holding the talisman between his hands.

“You really like that guy, huh?” Akihito quipped.

“Yes, and if he were to fall ill, all of his responsibilities would fall onto me. Illness is the one thing I can’t do anything about.”

Right. I’m still a student, so there’s no way I’d have a serious, important wish.
“I’ll wish for my grandmother’s good health too, then.”

Akihito’s eyes widened in shock. “What the heck, you guys?! Now I seem like the greedy one!”

“No, I think your wish was good,” Holmes said with a serious expression. “Those with honest, steadfast wishes are more likely to have them granted, I feel.”

Akihito looked bewildered. “R-Really?”

“Yes, really.”

After this and that, we finished our visit. Holmes asked, “Shall we go to Arashiyama now?”

Akihito and I nodded eagerly.

4

We left Suzumushi Temple and got in the car again. This time we headed for the Arashiyama district.

Holmes parked in a large (but mostly full) parking lot, and we strolled down the street, looking at the rows of gift shops.

“This is nostalgic,” I said. “I came here on a middle school trip before.” It was a fun and mysterious place.

“It’s nostalgic for me as well,” Holmes replied. “When I see the Togetsu bridge, it reminds me of my *jusan mairi*.”

Akihito chuckled and nodded. “Yeah, I remember my *jusan mairi* too. I want to turn around now.”

“As much as I hate to agree with you, I feel the same way. I also want to turn around.”

“Umm, what’s a *jusan mairi*?” I tilted my head.

“Huh?” Akihito stopped in his tracks. “Aoi, you didn’t have a *jusan mairi*?”

“Akihito, the *jusan mairi* is predominantly a Kansai tradition, so there are many people in other regions who don’t know about it.”

“H-Huuuh?” Akihito was blatantly shocked. “They don’t? I had no idea... It feels the same as Shichi-Go-San to me.” *This one I do know—it’s a traditional rite of passage held in November for three-and seven-year-old girls and five-year-old boys. Anyway, if it were anyone but Akihito saying that, I might’ve felt offended.*

“*Jusan mairi* is similar in concept to Shichi-Go-San. It’s a tradition where, on your thirteenth birthday in the traditional age system, you visit a temple or shrine to be blessed with wisdom. Across the Togetsu bridge, there’s a famous temple for *jusan mairi* called Horin-ji Temple. Legend says that after leaving the temple, if you look back, you’ll be forced to return the wisdom you just gained. So, you have to keep walking forward without turning back until you’ve crossed the Togetsu bridge.”

As usual, Holmes’s explanation was easy to understand.

“When I did mine,” Holmes continued, “my grandfather kept saying things behind me, trying to get me to turn around. Thanks to him, I have the resolve to not look back no matter what.” He slumped his shoulders.

Following behind Holmes, who continued to walk without turning around, I imagined the owner taunting him and couldn’t help but giggle.

So, we crossed the Togetsu bridge. A wide river flowed beneath it, and there was fall foliage on both sides. The vividly colored mountains were very beautiful. I could also see a lot of middle and high school students wearing their uniforms. They were probably here on field trips.

The gift shops, the river and bridge, and the natural beauty—it was a truly wonderful place. *Come to think of it, when I came to Kyoto on a field trip in middle school, we went to a bunch of places, but I can only really remember Kiyomizu-dera, Kinkaku-ji, and Arashiyama. It’s amazing that I can remember*

Arashiyama so well when it doesn't have a huge temple or anything. Is it because it's always wrapped in a fun, festive mood?

"Come to think of it, we did the Hozu River boat ride on my field trip. That was memorable too," I said.

Holmes and Akihito paused.

"Come to think of it, I've never done the Hozu River boat ride," Holmes said.

"Me neither," Akihito replied. They both sounded like they'd only just realized this now.

"You live in Kyoto, but you've never been on that wonderful boat ride? What a waste!" I teased.

"Oh man, she's fighting back!"

"In that case, let's go together next time," Holmes said with a smile. "Please be our guide."

I was at a loss for words. "N-No, I couldn't..." I stuttered, bewildered.

Akihito burst out laughing. "Yeah, Holmes doesn't need anyone's guidance!"

"This is also wicked in a way," I complained.

"No, this is a normal conversation," Holmes replied.

The three of us laughed as we walked to Tenryu-ji Temple.

5

We arrived at Tenryu-ji Temple and paid the entrance fee.

"Tenryu-ji is a Zen temple associated with Emperor Kanmu. It's known for its beautiful garden, and it's also a registered World Heritage Site," Holmes said as we walked through the temple grounds.

Gazing at the vivid red leaves and the large, well-maintained pond, I nodded, impressed. "This is a World Heritage Site too, huh?" *Kyoto really is amazing.*

A garden surrounded by mountains, a big pond with stepping stones, the autumn foliage reflected on the water's surface... There weren't only red

leaves, but yellow and the occasional bright green as well. The trees complemented each other's colors. *I've been to quite a few shrines and temples with Holmes, and all of their gardens were beautiful, but...*

"This garden really is magnificent," I murmured.

"It is," Holmes said, nodding. "They say that it's because of this garden that Tenryu-ji is considered top-class in Japan. It was designed by Soseki Muso, a Zen priest who was an expert in Japanese-style gardens."

Soseki Muso... That name sounds kind of cool.

"Huh, so they had a landscaping pro," Akihito remarked.

"Yes. Some of his other works are at Saiho-ji—known as the 'moss temple'—Eiho-ji Temple in Gifu Prefecture, Zuisen-ji Temple in Kanagawa Prefecture, and Erin-ji Temple in Yamanashi Prefecture. Each and every one of them is marvelous, so please visit them if you ever get the chance," Holmes explained passionately.

Akihito nodded with a strained face. "O-Okay. Man, are you some kind of shill?"

We walked farther into the garden and before long we were in a bamboo grove. The dignified rows of bright green stalks were very beautiful. It felt completely different from the unorganized wild thickets you find in the mountains.

"This is lovely too," I said.

"It's beautiful, right? People from Hokkaido would especially love it, because Hokkaido doesn't have bamboo thickets."

"I see..." Akihito and I replied in unison.

After visiting Tenryu-ji Temple, we ate lunch at a nearby Japanese restaurant and relaxed there until it was finally time to go to Yanagihara's house.

Yanagihara the appraiser lived a short drive away from Arashiyama. We parked outside the fence and passed under the wooden gate, which had been left open. Inside the gate was a sprawling Japanese-style garden that was

meticulously maintained, with neatly pruned trees and a koi pond. Past the garden was a long, one-story Japanese-style house with a black tiled roof. The Yagashira residence had been a stone house that resembled a Western art museum, but this one was completely different. It was a Japanese estate through and through. *This feels more like what I'd expect from an acclaimed appraiser's house, though. In other words, the Yagashira house must be unconventional.*

"Why, if it isn't Kiyotaka." A man wearing glasses and a suit walked up to us, smiling. He looked to be in his forties.

"Thank you for inviting me today," Holmes said, bowing gracefully. Akihito and I bowed too.

"Sorry for tagging along," I said.

"Kiyotaka informed us that you'd be coming," the man said. "Aoi and the budding entertainer, Akihito, yes? I've been watching your show, *A Fine Day in Kyoto*. Allow me to formally introduce myself: I'm Yanagihara's secretary, Taguchi." He smiled warmly. He was a refined-looking man with soft facial features.

"You're really watching it? Thank you so much!" Akihito leaned forward, eyes gleaming.

Taguchi leaned back to avoid him, seeming a bit overwhelmed. He adjusted his glasses and said, "You seem a little different from what I saw on TV, Akihito."

"A little? He's completely different," Holmes replied immediately. "The one on TV is a monkey playing pretend."

"S-Stop calling me a monkey!" Akihito exclaimed, his face bright red.

Taguchi and I laughed.

"A spirited one, I see," Taguchi remarked. "This will make the show more exciting." He smiled, his eyes narrowing behind his glasses.

Holmes tilted his head. "The show?"

"We have a small event planned—one fitting for an appraiser's birthday

party.”

“Oh, a game?!” Akihito exclaimed, not hiding his delight. “Now I’m excited.”

Holmes and I smiled awkwardly at him. The secretary had only said it was an “event.” He didn’t say anything about a game.

“Um, what kind of event is it?” I asked quietly.

Taguchi smiled. “We’re thinking of holding an ‘authenticity exhibition’ here at the Yanagihara estate.”

“An authenticity exhibition?” Holmes asked, walking beside Taguchi as we headed for the front door.

“Yes. Yanagihara is actually supervising an upcoming event called the ‘Past and Present Authenticity Exhibition’ for a certain department store.”

“That sounds like an interesting event.”

“Thank you. As such, some of the items are currently being stored here, and we thought we should take this opportunity to showcase them to our party guests today. We also want to play a small game that involves them.”

“I see,” Holmes said, nodding and folding his arms.

“Oh, so it *is* a game!” Akihito’s eyes lit up again. *Just how much does he love games?*

“Um, is this a game that even an ordinary person like me can play?” I asked.

Taguchi smiled at me and said, “But of course. We’ve planned it so that all of the guests can enjoy it, so please join in. There’s also a prize.”

“Whoo, a prize!” Akihito clenched his fists.

Holmes had an elegant smile on his face. “You’re spicing it up, I see. That’s great.”

“Thank you. Now then, right this way.”

Taguchi led us inside. The rooms and even the hallways were covered in tatami mats—but just when I thought it was a completely Japanese-style house, it turned out that there was also a Western-style hall for gatherings. Upon turning a corner, we encountered a large set of open double doors. In front of

them was a sign saying “Shigetoshi Yanagihara’s Birthday Celebration.” Past them was the aforementioned hall. It was spacious, with vermilion carpeting and chandeliers. There was a grand piano by the window. And of course, there were the many guests. Yanagihara was in the middle of the crowd, wearing a black kimono. His white hair and long beard gave him the aura of a mountain hermit.

“Sir, Kiyotaka has arrived,” Taguchi said loudly.

“Oh!” Yanagihara walked over to us. “Thanks for coming, Kiyotaka.”

“Happy birthday,” Holmes said with a smile. “Thank you for your invitation. Unfortunately, my grandfather was not able to attend today due to work.”

Yanagihara grinned. “Oh? That old goat called me yesterday and said, ‘Why would I go to an old geezer’s birthday party? Make do with my grandson.’” *Oh geez...*

“My grandfather is simply shy. This is from him,” Holmes said, holding out a box containing a bottle of wine. “Once again, happy birthday.”

“Why thank you. I don’t know how good his eyes are, but I know he at least has good taste in booze.” Yanagihara happily accepted the box, his face in a wrinkly grin.

Yanagihara and the owner are really good friends, huh? That’s what I gathered from their rude way of talking to each other.

“Well, go and enjoy yourself. Same goes to your companions.” Yanagihara looked at us.

I hurriedly bowed my head. “Th-Thank you, and happy birthday.”

“Yeah, happy birthday,” Akihito said awkwardly.

Yanagihara smiled cheerfully. “You’re the kid from TV, right? I’m enjoying *A Fine Day in Kyoto*. Keep up the good work.”

“I-I will, thank you.” Akihito bowed again.

Just like the owner, Yanagihara also had a unique, intense aura. Akihito seemed to be overwhelmed by it.

“And you’re the part-timer at Kura, right?” Yanagihara asked, looking straight at me. “The old goat was praising you, saying you’re doing a good job.”

“Th-Thank you.” Hearing that the owner praised me made me happy. *But why is Yanagihara staring at me like that?* I felt anxious.

“I guess she’s normal,” Yanagihara murmured.

Huh? I was dumbfounded, but before I could say anything, I heard a familiar voice come from beside me: “Hello, sir.”

This voice is... I turned to look, and Yoneyama stood there, smiling weakly.

“Oh, you came too?” asked Yanagihara. “The painting you made for Takamiya was real nice. I hope you enjoy yourself today,” he said, then walked away.

But what did he mean by “she’s normal”? Does he think I’m too ordinary to work at Kura? I felt a bit uneasy.

“The Yagashira family is surrounded by eccentrics, myself included,” Holmes explained. “Yanagihara probably thought it was unusual for us to hire a normal, non-eccentric girl.” He smiled gently.

“Yeah, Holmes is definitely a weirdo,” Akihito said, not missing a beat.

“I don’t want to hear that from you,” Holmes quipped, smiling back at him.

“Huh, they sure get along well.” Yoneyama looked amused.

Watching the two of them, I felt the gloominess in my heart instantly clear away.

After that, Yanagihara gave his speech and we toasted him with an assortment of champagne, wine, and juice. There was a variety of Japanese, Chinese, and Western treats laid out on the long tables, which I snacked on while absorbing the peaceful atmosphere in the hall.

A short while later, Taguchi took the stage to address us: “Now then, as I explained briefly earlier, we would like to play an appraisal game in light of the upcoming authenticity exhibition.” He opened a sliding door, revealing another section of the hall. Inside, there was a collection of artworks that were being watched over by security guards.

“Whoa, are those real home security guards?” Akihito murmured, trembling with awe.

Holmes smiled wryly. “Home security? No, those are probably the department store’s security guards.”

“We will be showing you works of art,” Taguchi continued. “Raise the flag corresponding to ‘real’ or ‘fake’ depending on your answer. Basically, it’s a game about determining authenticity. It’ll be a single-elimination tournament, and there’ll be a prize for those who make it to the end.” As he explained the rules, the staff handed out small flags to everyone. “Raise the white flag if you think it’s real, and the red flag if you think it’s fake—a ‘red lie.’ Additionally, appraisers and those in the fine art industry will not be allowed to participate.” As such, Holmes and various other guests were not given flags. “Please don’t give your friends any hints, either.” The audience chuckled at that.

“Huh, this sounds like fun. I’ve seen some good stuff thanks to my dad, so I might do pretty well.” Akihito’s eyes sparkled as he looked at the flags. I had no idea how well I’d do, but it did sound like it could be a fun game.

“Good luck, everyone,” Holmes said with a smile.

“Now then, here’s the first item.”

One of the security staff pushed a rolling table cart in front of us. There was something on it covered by a cloth. I felt like I was at an auction.

“Please give your answers at the same time, when I say so,” Taguchi cautioned. He swiftly removed the cloth, revealing a large brown jar. “This is a Shigaraki jar. You will have two minutes to examine it and determine whether it is real or fake. I know it’s a very short amount of time, but this is a game, so please be understanding. There are magnifying glasses and other tools on the table.”

Everyone nodded and approached the jar, staring intently at it.

“It’s kinda dirty,” Akihito murmured, furrowing his brows.

Dirty? It was an earthen color, with a rough texture and areas where the stone jutted out. *But, this is feldspar. Holmes showed me a Shigaraki jar at Kura before, so I know without a doubt that this is real.*

“Two minutes have passed. Is this Shigaraki jar real or fake? Please give us your verdict.”

Everyone raised their flags at once. I raised the white one, confident that it was real. Akihito, along with around half of the guests, raised the red one.

“Please give us the correct answer, Yanagihara.”

“Sorry for starting with a hard one right off the bat. This is real Shigaraki ware.”

The guests who raised the red flag all sounded disappointed.

“R-Really? Even though it’s so bumpy?” Akihito bit his lip in frustration.

Holmes chuckled. “That’s a jar that was used to store seeds. Since it was for practical use, it doesn’t have any flashy decorations. Well done, Aoi.”

“Thank you. I realized because you showed me one before. Those bumps in the stone are feldspar, right?”

“Correct. I’m impressed.” Holmes nodded with a smile. Next to him, Akihito was pouting.

“Now for the next item: an old Kutani plate.”

A large decorative plate was brought out. There were bright stripes of navy blue, green, and yellow on the outside, and there was a painting of a bird in the center.

“My, such lovely colors,” murmured one of the guests, a refined-looking woman wearing a semi-formal kimono.

The colors are beautiful, but...I think old Kutani ware would have more distinct coloring. These colors don’t have as much impact as the one I saw before, and they’re kind of blurring together. Then there’s the bird—Holmes taught me before that genuine Kutani ware has exceptional artwork. This bird painting doesn’t have the kind of quality that takes your breath away.

The plate was propped up vertically. I walked around to the other side to check the base.

“Two minutes have passed. Please raise your flags.”

Everyone raised their flags at the same time. Most of them were white, possibly because of what the woman had said. However, I raised the red one.

Taguchi signaled to Yanagihara with his eyes, and Yanagihara nodded and said, "This is a fake."

The audience stirred. I looked around and saw that only a few people had gotten it right.

Next was a Koseto vase and a Kizeto tea bowl, both of which I got right. Now the only participants remaining were me and another man.

"This will be the final round. Will we have a winner? Please look at this Shino tea bowl."

The tea bowl was brought out. It was a very fine work, and the bends had a unique aesthetic. *I heard that many counterfeits are like that. I've seen my fair share of them too, and each time, I thought: Counterfeits don't make my heart flutter the way it did when I encountered a Shino tea bowl for the first time at Kura. That one was a masterpiece.*

This might've been a high quality work of art, but I wasn't going to mistake it for a Shino tea bowl.

"Give us your verdict!"

The other man raised his white flag, while I raised red. "Ohhh!" went the crowd. The hall was filled with anticipation.

"Yanagihara, if you would," Taguchi said, sounding slightly excited as well.

"This is...a fake. Goodness, I hadn't expected such a young girl to show us this wonderful display of judgment. Well done!" Yanagihara clapped, and everyone in the hall cheered and applauded.

"That was amazing, Aoi!" Holmes walked up to me quickly, his eyes gleaming.

"Holmes!" Elated, I turned around, and Holmes immediately grasped my hands with his. My heart leapt.

"That was brilliant! I knew from the start that you had good eyes, and I'm proud to know that I was right." He grinned from ear to ear, still firmly holding my hands. My heart was beating a mile a minute.

“Th-Thanks. It’s because of everything you showed and taught me.” Ever since I started working at Kura, Holmes would show me every good piece that came in and teach me about it. His summer lectures helped as well. I only became this good at distinguishing counterfeits because I had Holmes as my teacher. *The warmth from his hands is still making my heart race, though.*

“Dang, Aoi. You’re amazing, huh?” Akihito said, amazed. Yoneyama was standing next to him, nodding and clapping.

“Yes, Aoi has a natural discerning eye, and she always looks directly for the truth, not averting her gaze. I think she’s truly amazing,” Holmes said, clapping. My heart was beating so fast that I couldn’t bring myself to say anything.

Yanagihara walked up to me, clapping as well. “I apologize for calling you normal earlier. It seems like I still have much to learn too. We rarely see such skill at your age. No wonder Kiyotaka chose you.” He nodded as he spoke.

My cheeks flushed. Even though Kiyotaka only chose me as a part-timer, it felt like there was another implication there that would make others misunderstand.

Then, Taguchi came forward from behind Yanagihara. “Congratulations on winning, Aoi. Your prize is a pair of vouchers for Yanagihara’s favorite inn, Tsukimiya at the Kinosaki hot springs.” He handed me a white envelope.

“Huh? Inn vouchers?” I squeaked, surprised. *This has to be a high-class inn, right?*

“Ah,” Holmes said, clapping his hands together. “I’ve heard of Tsukimiya. It’s a wonderful inn with a long history.”

Taguchi nodded enthusiastically. “So you know of it already. There are two vouchers, so feel free to go together.”

“Wh-What?” *Together?! He’s telling me to go with Holmes to a high-class inn in Kinosaki? We are being misunderstood!*

“I-I could never. We’re just coworkers,” I exclaimed without thinking. Taguchi looked a bit bewildered, while Holmes was smiling awkwardly. *Um, now I feel kind of bad.*

“Excuse my rudeness,” Taguchi said. “In that case, feel free to go with a friend or family member.”

“O-Okay... Um... Thank you very much.” I accepted the prize, too embarrassed to raise my head. The crowd continued to applaud.

After things calmed down, Taguchi looked around at everyone again. “Now then, we would like everyone to take a look at this next piece, including the appraisers. It’s the highlight of the upcoming exhibition: a Baroque painting.”

One of the security staff wheeled in a table cart with a Western painting on it. In the center of the painting was a man with a white mustache and beard. An angel was urging him in one direction, while three young women stood behind him. It was an impressive painting...and I had no idea whether it was real or fake.

A middle-aged man who was probably an appraiser gave a strained laugh and scratched his head. “It’s hard to judge a painting like this with your eyes alone. It needs a chemical analysis. Besides, Western paintings aren’t my specialty.”

Yanagihara chuckled and nodded. “Indeed, Western paintings are difficult. The appraisers gathered here today all have their reputations at stake, so it must be hard to give an answer. How about we have Kiyotaka answer, then? He’s skilled, but he’s still young, so he has little to lose.”

Everyone looked at Holmes. *Holmes had said that Western paintings were his weakness. And like that appraiser said just now, it must be difficult to judge a painting like this with your eyes alone. I know Holmes is amazing, but would he be able to answer this?* Even I was starting to panic.

Holmes chuckled and held up his index finger. “This is the ‘magnificent imitation’ of Rubens’s work, right?”

A few people laughed, but most of the audience was confused, myself included.

“I knew you could do it, Kiyotaka,” Yanagihara said. “Could you explain it to everyone else?”

“Of course. The National Museum of Western Art in Ueno once purchased

Rubens's *The Flight of Lot and His Family from Sodom* for one hundred and fifty million yen. However, in 1978, it was determined that the painting was a forgery. Paintings with the same name had been found elsewhere in the world: two in American museums and one in London. Scientific analyses such as x-rays were performed, and it became clear that the genuine painting was one of the ones in America, while the one in Japan was a counterfeit. It resulted in an uproar, but the curator of the museum labeled it a 'magnificent imitation,' which apparently calmed things down," Holmes explained in his usual gentle and easy-to-understand way. "So, this is that 'magnificent imitation.' I was able to identify it because I've seen this work before."

The guests applauded.

"Well done, Holmes," praised Yanagihara. "Now, there's one more I'd like you to take a look at."

Another painting was brought in. This one depicted a herd of sheep on a small cliff. The ocean could be seen on the other side of the hill. It was a pretty painting, and the sheep were charming. Once again, I had no idea whether it was real or fake.

"*Our English Coasts*, by the English painter William Holman Hunt. Could you tell us if it's real or fake?" Yanagihara had a sharp look in his eyes.

Holmes struggled to respond for a moment. He folded his arms and looked intently at the painting. It was the first time I'd seen him take so long to perform an appraisal—normally he could determine authenticity immediately. *I guess Western paintings really are hard for him.*

"Hey, Yoneyama, can you tell?" whispered a man behind me, who I assumed was in the art industry.

"No, I have no idea," Yoneyama replied.

Holmes is young, so they might think he has nothing to lose from getting the answer wrong. But this is Holmes we're talking about. If he's being challenged like this, there's no way he'll make a mistake.

After a period of silence, Holmes opened his mouth to speak. "It's very well painted, but I believe that it's a forgery."

“What makes you think that?” Yanagihara asked with a sharp glint in his eye.

“I’ve never seen this painting in person before, but I’ve heard that it was the best of Hunt’s ‘natural light’ paintings and won a Birmingham Award. However, when I look at this painting, even though it’s painted very well overall, the ‘natural light’ doesn’t stand out to me, when that’s what it was supposed to excel at.”

Yanagihara and Taguchi looked at each other. Tension filled the hall. *What’s the real answer?* My hands were sweating as I squeezed them together, praying that he got it right.

Then, Yanagihara and Taguchi clapped. “Brilliant,” Yanagihara declared. “This is a counterfeit that was borrowed from a certain gallery. It’s going to be displayed at the exhibition as an example of a well-made forgery.”

Everyone cheered and applauded.

“I don’t really get it, but Holmes sure is amazing.”

“No wonder he’s Seiji’s favorite student.”

Despite all of the praise, Holmes didn’t smile. He walked up to Yanagihara and asked quietly, “Could you tell me the name of the person who lent you this painting?”

“Hmm.” Yanagihara tilted his head. “I think he said his name was Morita?”

Taguchi answered immediately, “No, sir. It was Moria. A rather unusual surname.”

Holmes’s eyebrow twitched. “Moria?” he murmured. “Was he the one who suggested that you play this game at your birthday party?” he asked in a low voice.

Taguchi nodded, surprised. “Yes. I’m surprised you knew. He said that it’d make the party more exciting, and he was right.”

“Did he say to have me do the Hunt painting?” Holmes asked.

“No, he didn’t name you, but he did say, ‘This one is extremely difficult to discern, so you should ask the youngest appraiser, since they’ll have the least to lose.’ Then he said—oh right, there was a strange message from him. Please

wait here for a moment.” Taguchi left and then came back holding something. “He said that if the young appraiser got it right and asked who had provided the painting, to show them this.” Taguchi held out a round mirror.

Holmes accepted the mirror, looked at it, and laughed. “Thank you. Sorry, but I have something urgent to attend to, so would it be all right if I excused myself?” he asked, still smiling.

“Huh? That’s fine. Thank you for coming today.” Taguchi bowed, seeming confused.

“Aoi, Akihito, feel free to enjoy the rest of the party. I’ll come pick you up later.” Holmes walked briskly out of the hall.

Akihito and I hurriedly followed him.

“H-Holmes, what happened?” I asked.

“Seriously, dude. What happened?”

Holmes clicked his tongue. “What’s this ‘Moria’ nonsense...?”

“H-Holmes?” Akihito stiffened.

Holmes left the house and got in the car. Akihito and I hopped in too. As soon as Holmes confirmed that we were all inside, he started driving.

“Wh-What’s going on?” I asked, bewildered.

Holmes smiled apologetically, seeming to have come back to his senses. “The one who prepared that counterfeit was Ensho.”

“Huh? You mean the person from the art gallery, Moria?”

Akihito clapped his hands together. “Oh, I get it! It’s Moriarty!”

Oh, I see. Sherlock Holmes’s rival is Professor Moriarty. That’s why Ensho took on the name Moria. No wonder Holmes was annoyed.

“He must’ve heard that Yanagihara was supervising the authenticity exhibition and would be having a birthday party. He used it as a chance to challenge me—I did think it was strange that there would be such a clever game at Yanagihara’s party,” Holmes said nonchalantly, despite the rude insinuation.

“So, um, where are we going?” I asked.

“Ensho told me a location in the form of a riddle. The painting we saw before was originally named *Our English Coasts*, but the title was later changed to *Strayed Sheep*.”

“Strayed sheep...”

“Then, I was given a round mirror. This indicated a place. It meant, ‘If you get it, then come see me here.’” Holmes had a sharp look in his eyes.

Stray sheep and a round mirror... What place do those indicate?

Akihito and I, overwhelmed by Holmes’s intensity, could only gulp in anticipation.

6

We headed north. There was a tense atmosphere in the car...or so I thought.

“Man, he went for a Moriarty reference? That’s so funny.” Akihito was clapping his hands and laughing in the back seat. I couldn’t tell if he was being tactless on purpose or not. In a way, he was the strongest of us all.

“Come to think of it, you said you were a Sherlock fan, right, Akihito?” I asked. “Have you read all of the books?” He’d said he was a fan when we first met. That’s why he was annoyed by Holmes’s nickname and picked fights with him. *He must be a pretty hardcore fan. I feel bad saying this, but it’s hard to believe that he likes to read.*

“Nah, I haven’t read ’em. I became a fan because of the anime.”

“Anime?” Holmes and I asked in unison.

“Yeah, you haven’t seen it? There’s a Holmes anime with anthropomorphized dogs. It was really cool! Thanks to that, I ended up watching all of the movies and puppet shows too. It’s always been my dream to be Holmes in a play or a movie.”

“Wh-What about the original novels?”

“Haven’t read a single word,” Akihito answered with a straight face.

Holmes and I looked at each other. Then, Holmes burst out laughing.

“What’s so funny?”

“Nothing,” Holmes said, chuckling. “Your silliness helped me cool my head a bit. Thank you.”

“Uh, okay? Well, you’d better cool off, yeah.”

“R-Right, Holmes. I think that Ensho called himself Moria to get a rise out of you,” I said, peering closely at him.

Holmes paused before calmly replying, “You’re right. Apparently, the blood rushes to my head when Ensho’s involved. Thank you, Aoi.”

Phew, he’s back to the usual Holmes.

“So, where are we going?” I asked again.

Holmes had a distant look in his eyes. “We’ve...already arrived,” he said, parking the car.

Since the parking lot was covered in gravel, crunching sounds rang out as the tires ran over it. I saw a white wall with a tiled roof. *Is this...a temple?* We’d reached this building after going north almost all the way to the end of Senbon Street.

“This is Takagamine in Kita-ku, right?” Akihito asked, getting out of the car.

“Yes,” Holmes replied as he and I got out as well.

So this is Kita-ku... Come to think of it, Akihito said before that his family used to live in the Kinugasa district of Kita-ku.

We’d come up quite a high slope to get here, and it felt like we were right at the foot of a mountain. *I tend to go everywhere by bike, so I’d probably regret it if I tried to bike here.*

“This way,” Holmes said and started walking towards the temple.

It was already past 4:00 p.m., so there were barely any cars in the parking lot. *Most temples close at five.*

We walked down a narrow path until we reached a small, old wooden gate. A sign saying “Genko-an Zen Meditation” hung from one of the posts.

“Genko-an...” I felt like I’d heard the name before.

Holmes stared fixedly at the gate. “Yes, this is where Ensho called me to: Genko-an Temple,” he said in a quiet but firm tone. He passed through the small gate, and we followed right behind him.

The garden on the other side was certainly not large, but it was well-maintained and refreshingly beautiful. The information desk was on a porch. We paid the entrance fee and went inside the temple.

Despite being an old, remote temple, it had a dignified aura, as if the building itself were standing tall. The floor and tatami mats were polished to a shine, and flowers were placed on tables and in hallway recesses. Upon entering the main building, we were greeted by two windows next to each other, one square and one circular. The windows displayed the bright red foliage outside as if they were beautiful paintings.

I knew what these two windows were—perhaps I’d seen them on TV before. They were the Window of Confusion and the Window of Enlightenment. There were short wooden fences, about ankle height, preventing us from getting close to them. Past the windows was the Buddha. No one else was inside the room.

“H-Huh? No one’s here,” said Akihito.

“Y-Yeah.” I was a bit disappointed.

“For now, let’s pay our respects,” Holmes said with a smile. He stood in front of the Buddha, tossed a coin in the offering box, and pressed his hands together in prayer.

“Oh, okay.”

“S-Sure.”

Akihito and I hurried to give our offerings and pray too.

When I opened my eyes, I froze, noticing that someone else was in the room with us. He was probably in his late twenties or early thirties. He was bald like a monk and he wore a dark gray kimono. He looked at us with a warm smile. If I hadn’t known better, I would’ve assumed he was one of this temple’s priests.

“Fancy meeting you here,” he said, narrowing his eyes at Holmes in an

amused smile.

This has to be Ensho.

“You were the one who called me here.” Holmes smiled back and walked towards him. Akihito and I stood stock still, holding our breath as we watched them.

“I enjoyed the time spent waiting for you. I didn’t know if I wanted you to come or not.” He opened his folding fan and hid his mouth behind it as he cackled.

“And how do you feel now?” Holmes asked quietly.

Ensho stopped laughing. “You did well to see through that forgery. What was the clincher?”

Holmes paused before answering, “Light.”

“I see. Painting light on shadows is ever so hard.” Ensho chuckled and then looked up. “I assume you figured out this location immediately, right?”

“Yes. *Strayed Sheep* and a round mirror. The strayed or confused sheep were in a rectangular painting. The mirror represented the window to the soul. These windows at Genko-an immediately came to mind. The square window is the Window of Confusion, which represents the suffering humans go through in life. The circular one beside it is the Window of Enlightenment, which represents Zen maturity and the universe. The round mirror that reflects its holder also represents one’s inner ‘universe’... It was a rather sophisticated arrangement.” Holmes smiled.

“Why thank you.” Ensho smiled back.

Even though both of them were smiling warmly, the air was tense, as if they could cross swords at any moment. It was hard to breathe.

From where I was standing, I could see the two windows beyond them as they faced off. Outside, bright red leaves fluttered in the wind. The scene was terrifyingly beautiful, more so than anything I could ever imagine. I was speechless.

“As I said before, I truly enjoyed waiting here for you. Would you come, or

would you not? Did I want you to, or did I not? I felt like I was waiting for a lover who'd left me."

"Now that's an unpleasant thought."

"You're not wrong." Ensho smiled with only his eyes, then sighed. "Most counterfeiters eventually find themselves wanting people to see their work as their own. They want to leave their mark on the world, and that's how they end up getting exposed. But me, I could never understand why they'd do that," he murmured to himself as he gazed through the Window of Confusion. "I grew up in Amagasaki. Had no mom, and my dad was a painter. He was pretty good, but he was an alcoholic, so even when he did manage to get work, he'd spend the advance payment on booze and usually fail to meet the deadline. I couldn't just sit there and watch, so I did his work for him, copying his style. That made Dad real happy. He always treated me like a burden before, but this made him think I was a genius. He praised me and got me to copy other paintings, and that's how my life as a counterfeiter began."

Listening to him, I gulped. *So he was making forgeries from the very start. It began with him copying his father's work... His story matches Holmes's profiling exactly.*

"By copying them perfectly without leaving a trace of my own presence, I could be praised by the one person I wanted to impress the most. I was happy with that. But eventually he drank himself to death... After that, I continued accepting forgery requests out of habit, but it all felt boring. I didn't know what I was doing with my life, so I went into the priesthood. Then, when you—someone *younger* than me—saw through my forgery when no one else could, I got excited. I wanted you to find me hiding in the shadows. Today was exciting, too. I wanted you to see through it, but at the same time, I didn't. I kept going back and forth. For the first time, I felt like I understood all of those people who wanted to leave their own mark on their counterfeits. So, I really had no idea whether I wanted you to come or not." Ensho looked at Holmes. "But when you asked me 'How do you feel?' just now, it all became clear."

He closed the folding fan and thrust it at Holmes's throat.

Holmes gasped and immediately caught it between his hands. "That was

dangerous. Were you trying to stab me in the throat?”

“Of course not. This is just payback for last time.” Ensho grinned.

The tension was too much. Akihito and I were both shocked speechless. We covered our mouths with our hands, our faces pale.

“It became clear that I really can’t stand you. Everyone likes you because you act all prim and proper, but no one can tell what you’re thinking, and it turns out you’re pure black on the inside. You’re like the personification of Kyoto itself. Ugh, no wonder I hate this place.”

Holmes strengthened his grip on the fan and snapped it in two. “Why thank you. It’s an honor to be likened to Kyoto,” he said in a Kyoto accent with a fearless smile.

“Oh, there it is—your true self. That dark face gives it away.”

“As you said, Kyoto men are wicked.”

“I can’t stand you, but I do like that side of you.”

“Meanwhile, I hate everything about you.”

“Yep, this is good. I can’t retire yet—not ’til I’ve given you the humiliation of the century.”

“Unfortunately, I have no intention of being humiliated. Why don’t you go ahead and retire now?”

“You never know. I guess I want to have pride in what I’ve done.”

“Counterfeiters don’t need pride.”

“Ouch.” Ensho let go of the folding fan and chuckled. “Hey, didja know? This temple’s ceiling has bloodstains on it.” He looked up at the ceiling.

Holmes nodded. “Of course I know.”

Akihito and I looked up too. There were black stains and even a footprint on the ceiling. Chills ran down my spine.

“Wh-Whoa, why’s there a footprint up there?! Is that from a ninja?!” Akihito exclaimed.

Holmes's smile was strained. "There was no battle here at Genko-an. Instead, the ceiling was built with wood that came from the floor of Momoyama Castle in Fushimi. Many people were killed in the battle there between Ieyasu Tokugawa's loyal force and Mitsunari Ishida's troops. In order to bring happiness to them in the afterlife and honor their sacrifices, the bloodstained floorboards were sent to five temples, and Genko-an was one of them."

"O-Oh, that makes sense." I nodded and looked back down. Ensho had already disappeared. Akihito and I gasped in surprise, while Holmes simply sighed.

After a moment of silence, Holmes said, "I see. He really is like a ninja." He opened the broken fan that was still in his hands and grimaced at it. "Ugh, what an utter nuisance."

"Huh? What happened?" I asked.

"This fan was originally mine. He wrote 'I win' all over it."

Okay, that's pretty annoying. "B-But in the end, it was you who won, right?"

"Yeah, you saw through his forgery again. There's nothing to be mad about."

Holmes frowned. "Wrong."

"Huh?"

"I only identified that painting as a forgery because I knew that 'it was the best of Hunt's 'natural light' paintings and won a Birmingham Award.' If it weren't for that, I wouldn't have figured it out. When I said that 'light' was the deciding factor, he smiled as if he knew he'd won. Even though I saw through his forgery, he considered it a victory for himself—because it *was* his victory and my loss." Holmes clenched the folding fan, his shoulders trembling. I could tell how frustrated he was, and it hurt.

What am I supposed to say at a time like this? "But in the end, you still did it. Your knowledge; your victory!" ...As if. I doubt he wants to hear forced encouragement like that.

I clenched my fists and looked straight at him. "I-In that case, the next time

Ensho comes at you with something, make sure you expose him for real!" I declared.

Holmes looked at me in surprise. "Aoi..."

Akihito gaped at me too.

"Please don't lose next time, no matter what," I continued.

Holmes's eyes widened for a moment before his expression relaxed. "All right. Next time, I swear I'll give him a thorough beating." He smiled brightly.

I felt like I was going to cry. "Holmes..." I looked down at the floor, my eyes hot.

"Forgive me," he said, reverting to his Kyoto accent. "I put you through a scary experience." He gently stroked my head with his large hand.

"I'm okay," I said, shaking my head.

"Sorry, but it's closing time," came a voice from behind us. Startled, we looked up.

"Shall we get going, then?" Holmes said. Akihito and I nodded.

7

I looked at the two beautiful windows in the corner of my eye as we left the temple building. The square Window of Confusion representing suffering in human life, and the circular Window of Enlightenment representing the universe. The master counterfeiter Ensho had decided to take the road of enlightenment, but after being exposed by Holmes, he returned to his earthly life. Did he choose this place as a representation of his own confusion? "If he sees through me, then I'll end it here. If he doesn't, then that's satisfying in itself, so I'll still end it here." He went around in circles, unable to decide.

However, the conclusion that he came to here was that he really wanted to defeat Holmes. It was a human desire. He chose the square window, not the circle... I had mixed feelings about the cause and effect that was involved.

Holmes stopped. Akihito, who had been in front of us, turned the corner

ahead and disappeared from view.

I stopped too. “Holmes?” *What’s wrong?* I looked up at him.

“Thank you, Aoi,” he said, still looking straight ahead.

“Huh?”

“Your encouragement gave me strength. I’ll keep training until I can see through any counterfeit, not just Ensho’s,” he declared. He seemed invigorated.

Oh, I see. Ensho...must have been sent to lead Holmes to greater heights.

“Okay. Do your best!” I smiled at him.

He reached out and squeezed my right hand. Startled, I saw that he was gazing straight at me. The way he held my hand—it felt different from when I won the authenticity game. This time, he was holding it tightly. His hand was hot, as was the look in his eyes.

“Aoi...”

“Y-Yes?” My heart was beating so fast that I thought it might explode.

“I...” He squeezed my hand tighter, and—

“Hey, what’s taking you guys so long?!” came Akihito’s voice from the parking lot, startling us.

Holmes sighed and let go. He ran his hand through his front bangs and said, “Sorry, I’ll tell you later, when we have more time. Particularly when Akihito isn’t around.”

“O-Okay.” I nodded, still bewildered.

“Hurry uuup!” Akihito shouted again.

“We’re coming!” Holmes answered, exasperated. He turned to me and smiled gently. “Shall we go?”

“O-Okay.” I nodded firmly and started walking. *What was Holmes about to say?* His passionate gaze and the feeling of his hand lingered in my mind. I blushed, my heart still racing.

We reached the parking lot, where Akihito was waving at us from in front of the car.

“What took you guys so long?”

“Sorry. I was regretting bringing you along,” Holmes said coldly, opening the car door.

“Huh?” Akihito blinked. “What was that all about?” He tilted his head and got in the car. “Anyway, I could really go for some meat. When you think of Kyoto, you think of meat, right?”

“Sure. You can’t fight on an empty stomach.” Holmes nodded and gripped the steering wheel.

“Kyoto is associated with harmony, right? Not meat.” I giggled from the passenger seat as I fastened my seatbelt.

They both looked at me, confused.

“Aoi, have you not heard that Kyoto is famous for its restaurants specializing in meat?”

“Yeah, it’s got good meat from all around the region.”

“Yes, and there are even course meals dedicated to meat.”

“Yeah, heck, I’d even recommend that over the traditional Kyoto stuff like simmered tofu.”

“I feel the same way. I do recommend the traditional food as well, though.”

The two were practically talking over each other, surprising me. “R-Really? I didn’t know.”

“Shall we go, then?”

“Yeah, let’s go to Hiro.”

“Moritaya’s a good option too.”

I looked out the window as I listened to them talk. The orange sunset sky was breathtakingly beautiful. After staring at it to sear it into my memory, I closed my eyes.

I don't think I'll ever forget what happened here. Two young geniuses, an appraiser and a counterfeiter—the sparks that flew between them were beautiful like autumn leaves. Holmes's frustration, followed by his determination. Ensho, who was on the path of enlightenment, chose to remain in confusion. Meanwhile, his existence enlightened Holmes to the path that he should take. It really is karmic.

Confusion and enlightenment... I think that no matter how hard you try to understand, as long as you were born as a human, it'll be difficult to achieve complete enlightenment. You live in confusion, and occasionally you understand, but in the end, you go back to being lost.

When I'm feeling hopelessly lost, I want to come here again to look at that perfect circle—the window to the universe...

The car set off, leaving Genko-an and heading down the slope. The sun was setting to our right. Red leaves fluttered in the chilly wind, as if they were signifying the end of autumn and welcoming in Kyoto's winter.

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Translator's Corner

Thank you for reading Volume 2 of *Holmes in Kyoto!* Since the challenges of translating this series remain basically the same as in Volume 1, this time I'll spare you the repetition and elaborate on some interesting cultural tidbits that came up in the book instead. The first two are also examples of things that I added brief explanations to in the text that weren't in the original book.

In Chapter 1, Aoi goes to a party for the owner's 77th birthday, which I noted is "considered a special age in Japanese culture." The 77th birthday is actually so special that it has its own name in Japanese: *kiju*. It's a celebration of long life that likely originated in the Muromachi period (1336-1573). Since it's an old tradition, it's also based on the old aging system, where you're one year old when you're born and, regardless of what day you were born on, get one year older on New Year's Day. This system has been phased out now, but it still remains in traditions such as *kiju*.

In Chapter 3, there's a brief explanation of temple naming when Holmes brings up that Zuiryu is Nanzen-ji Temple's mountain name. Japanese Buddhist temples usually have three names: the mountain name, the cloister name (optional), and the main name. Only the main name is commonly used, but even the main name can be much longer than what the temple is usually called. For example, Nanzen-ji Temple's full name is "Taihei Kokoku Nanzen Zen-ji." And of course, there are also nicknames for temples, such as Suzumushi Temple in Chapter 5.

In case you're curious about Hanshan and Shide from Chapter 3 who were said to have "quite an eccentric story": Hanshan and Shide (called Kanzan and Jittoku in Japanese) were Chinese Buddhist monks from the Tang Dynasty. Hanshan was an eccentric poet of noble birth who lived as a fugitive in a mountain cave. Shide was a kitchen cleaner at the nearby temple who was abandoned as a child. The two of them became close friends and Shide would sneak food scraps to Hanshan. They're always depicted looking disheveled and

laughing. Shide wrote poems too, and stories tell of his great wisdom, showing that you shouldn't look down on people in lower positions.

In Chapter 5, Holmes brings up the Zen priest Soseki Muso, and Aoi comments (in her head) that the name sounds cool. "Muso" is written with the characters for "dream" and "window"—a fitting name for a Zen master. Aside from the dream associations, it's also homonymous with the words for "peerless" and "blank mind."

Editor's Corner

When I started editing for J-Novel Club, I didn't anticipate spending time Googling to look at great works of Western painting. But Holmes is making me think about that kind of art too, although for kind of a funny reason, in this volume. In part 4, the characters are discussing *Las Meninas* by the Baroque period artist Diego Velázquez, and Aoi looks at a reproduction of it in a book. Her description of the painting in the first draft of the translation included the lines:

"The youngest of the three was stepping on the back of a dog that was lying down. It looked cruel at first glance, but the dog didn't seem to be in pain, so it seemed to just be childish mischief."

Now, it's fair to say that I might be a little obsessed with dogs (hey, want to follow my pug on Instagram??). When I'm not working on light novels, most of what I do is write about dogs. So this jumped out at me—my reaction was "Whoa, does this masterpiece actually show a kid *stepping on a dog?!'*" And if so, could it really not be hurting the dog? This seemed unrealistic to me. I've stepped lightly on my dog's foot now and again, and let me tell you, even that is a major catastrophe, to hear her tell it.

Usually when we have to deal with confusing descriptions in translations, it's tricky. We can't get inside the author's head to see exactly what they were visualizing—we have to go off the words on the page. But in this case it was simple: all I had to do was search online for an image of the painting. I was relieved to discover that the dog was rather large, the child was rather small, and what was going on was really more like she was resting her foot on its back in a way that a tolerant family pet might well ignore with no problem. I still wanted to tell the kid "Get your foot off that dog!" but it was clearly not nearly as bad as what the wording had brought to my mind.

So with a few changes, we went with, “The youngest of the three was placing one foot on the back of a dog that was lying down. It looked cruel at first glance, but the dog didn’t seem to be bothered.” I think that gets it across—but you can look up the painting yourself to see if you think we got it right.

The other puzzles that arose in this volume were more like what you’d expect: wrestling with differences between Japanese and English. For example, in Part 8, they’re talking about the name of the person—eventually revealed to be the forger himself—who lent a painting:

“Hmm.” Yanagihara tilted his head. “I think he said his name was Moriya?”

Taguchi answered immediately, “No, sir. It was Moria. A rather unusual surname.”

This looks fine on the page, and it works in the original because Moria and Moriya actually sound different in Japanese. But since this is dialogue, we need to make sure it would work when spoken aloud in English, and the problem is, the average English speaker would pronounce these names exactly the same. I’ll refrain from getting up on my former-linguistics-teacher soapbox and giving an introductory lecture about English phonology, but the short story is, we stick a *y* sound between the two vowels in a word like “Moria” without even realizing we’re doing it.

When I asked Minna about what we could do to fix this, she told me that we had to take into account the fact that Moriya is a real Japanese surname and Moria isn’t—so it makes sense that Moria would be hard to remember and that a similar real name would come to Yanagihara’s mind instead. She suggested another real name, Morita, which also differs from Moria by only one sound, so we used that instead.

Working out this detail actually made me feel oddly nostalgic, because it reminded me of my very first trip to Japan many years ago where I figured out—fortunately *before* I tried to take the wrong train—that there’s both a Keiyō line and a Keiō line in Tokyo, which sound exactly the same to an English speaker, for exactly the same reason, but go to very different places. I guess

that mattered more back in the day when you might talk to a human being to ask for directions instead of consulting an app, but still, who knows, maybe along with all our readers are learning about art from this series, reading these notes will someday help one of you avoid ending up somewhere out in Chiba prefecture when that wasn't where you meant to go.



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Holmes of Kyoto: Volume 2

by Mai Mochizuki

Translated by Minna Lin Edited by Linda Lombardi

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